

LOVE CAN BE DANGEROUS

MURDER sometimes moves in exclusive company. Take the swishy Hotel Miramonte for example: a most select establishment. Yet somebody neglected to keep a killer out. That was when dress designer Margaret Graham complained to the management that there was a man in her room—a man who was out cold, shot through the heart.

When the squad from Los Angeles Homicide arrived they found the trail as cold as the corpse. Then Sergeant Danny O'Leary was handed the assignment of a lifetime. His job? To get chummy with a creature more dazzling than any he had ever dared dream about. Sandra's beauty was breathtaking. Along with it she had wealth, gaiety, a sharp intelligence, and for Danny it all added up to class. Was she holding back something about that love letter written by her dead brother? Why should her own life be threatened? It was up to Danny to find out. He went about it willingly. To soothe and guard a girl like Sandra proved exciting in more ways than one. Before it was over Danny learned that love can really be dangerous, when mixed with murder.

In a review of one of Mr. Cohen's previous successes, Anthony Boucher wrote in *The New York Times* that this veteran author had "moved in on the slick glamour school of mystery novels and made it peculiarly his own." *Love can be Dangerous*, fast-paced in his usual manner, is one of Octavus Roy Cohen's best.

By the same Author

BORRASCA

OCTAVUS ROY COHEN



***Love
can be Dangerous***



**MUSEUM
STREET
THRILLER**

*LONDON
ARTHUR BARKER
LIMITED*

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*All of the characters in this book are fictitious
and any resemblance to actual persons, living
or dead, is purely coincidental*

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1

LIEUTENANT MARTY WALSH, night watch commander of the Homicide Division, Los Angeles Police Department, replaced the telephone, made a quick survey of the room and pointed his finger at me.

"You're elected, Danny," he said. "Let's go."

I followed him downstairs into the basement of the City Hall garage. He eased himself behind the wheel of one of the Homicide cars, did a little backing and filling, and then went down the short ramp into Main Street, where he turned right.

At the first corner he turned right again, which headed us in the general direction of the Pacific Ocean, but not until we were half-way up the hill did he flash on the red blinker and hit the siren. That meant Code 3, and in Los Angeles police parlance Code 3 means get to your destination as fast as possible regardless of traffic rules.

Not until we nosed into the lower reaches of Sunset Boulevard did Marty really turn her loose, but from that moment on it was a case of hold your hat. We split the night wide open.

Marty was an expert driver: he couldn't be less and still be alive. But even knowing that, I cringed as he passed on the wrong side of a bus and cut across in front of a truck which had been slow in pulling over to give us the right of way. I found myself exhaling slowly and carefully without knowing that I had been holding my breath. I said, "I can see the headlines already, Marty: 'Two Handsome Detectives Converted into Hamburger in Auto Smashup.'"

The faintest suspicion of a grin played briefly across his lips. "Scared?" he asked.

"Brother, you guessed it."

"Keep tight against the seat of your pants, Danny. We got a long way to go."

I took a quick look at him. He was everything that he didn't seem to be: heavier than one would have guessed, stronger than he looked, smarter than he sounded. He was moderately good-looking, thirty-eight years of age, and he had brown hair and eyes. His face could tell a lot or it could tell nothing, all depending on how well you knew him. Right now it was giving with the information.

At the moment Marty displayed that tense expectancy which is not uncommon in a dick who is onto a good thing. I was busting to ask questions, but managed to control myself. I knew he'd give me the lowdown sooner or later. I also knew he couldn't be goosed into it.

I had given up trying to count our narrow escapes by the time Marty touched on the purpose of our mission. He approached the matter from left field, which was a mannerism of his.

"You at home in high society?" he asked.

"To the manor born," I answered. "I know all the tricks."

"Like for instance?"

"Well," I said, "I know enough not to eat green peas with my knife without first mashing them. When addressing ladies, I always say 'Ma'am' if they're over forty, and 'Babe' if they're under thirty. If they're under eighteen, I leave 'em be. I am on terms of greatest intimacy with butlers, footmen, upstairs maids, and millionaires. I look sweet as a candy rabbit in a tuxedo, provided I have enough dough to rent one. Do I qualify?"

"Maybe," he said noncommittally. "Maybe not."

"You took the words right out of my mouth." Then I asked the payoff question, the one he'd been waiting for me to ask. "Something big cooking?"

"No bigger than murder. That's how it sounded, anyway."

"Hm-m!" I shook my head. "Even in high society murder is illegal, isn't it?"

"Sometimes. That's what we're going to find out."

We hit the outskirts of Hollywood and screamed through. Marty didn't shave danger by as much as an inch where a half-inch would do. He said, "You ever been to the Miramonte Hotel, Danny?"

"No."

"Familiar with it?"

"Sort of. In West Los Angeles Division, isn't it?"

"Right."

For the next few minutes he concentrated on keeping us alive as we threaded our way through the inevitable traffic snarl at Sunset and Crescent Heights Boulevard. Then we were racing through the Strip toward the boundary of Beverly Hills.

I tried digging into my brain for what I'd heard of the Miramonte Hotel. I knew that it had been in existence for less than two years and that it was very, very exclusive, which means that it barred everybody who couldn't afford the prices. It was west of the fashionable Bel-Air Hotel and was, in general, the same sort of a place: fancy main building containing public and private rooms, a miniature village of individual cottages where full hotel service was included in the exorbitant charges, two tennis courts, a vast swimming pool surrounded by cabañas, lounges, chairs, tables and gaudy umbrellas. It was inhabited by the customary service personnel, invariably proficient in the art of caring for wealthy guests and scenting a fast buck long before it ever broke from cover; the usual guests, some young, some old, and some trying to act younger than they were. The guests were customarily of the two best-known sexes although there were several notable in-betweeners. I had heard that the food was delectable and even good, that the atmosphere was rich and rarefied, that most of the guests were on a permanent or semi-permanent basis, and that there were always a few transients. It had a reputation of being upper-bracket stuff no matter which way you sliced it.

Frankly, it seemed to be a hell of an incongruous place for a murder. I remarked as much to Marty and he shook his head sadly.

"Maybe it ain't," he said. "Guy was shot, is all I know. Deader'n a herring. What brought me out was that the assistant manager—and oh! my dear! was he in a tizzy!—said that the victim was apparently a burglar. Now I'm asking you, Sergeant O'Leary, does that make sense?"

"Why not? In a plush joint like that, there should be plenty to burglar."

"At ten o'clock at night with the place swarming with guests and hired help?"

"Not smart, I'll admit, Marty. But still logical."

We were now in an area of handsome homes, some of which were really in the estate class. We flashed by the impressive Beverly Hills Hotel, along the edge of Bel-Air where you've got to be lousy with dough even to own a mortgage, past the road where we would have turned off if we'd been going to the Bel-Air Hotel, which we weren't, and then, with a screeching of tires, we swung sharply right on a smoothly paved road which probed into one of the innumerable canyons. There was an invigorating crispness in the air; the aroma of affluence surrounded us. I said: "After some of these jobs we've worked in Central and Newton Divisions, Marty—this is going to be a breeze. I'm fed to the eyebrows with creeps, junkies, winos, and queers."

"You'll find 'em all here or hereabouts," answered Marty cynically. "But they all got folding money."

I was silent for a while. Then I said, "An idea keeps crawling through my alleged brain, Lieutenant."

"Tie it down," he retorted. "You may never get another."

"It's this: a prowler is shot. Maybe even a burglar. It still doesn't figure you'd flash out here like a shooting star."

Marty grinned. "Okay, Danny: so I've been holding out. Though what you said doesn't necessarily figure. Knock off somebody in this neck of the woods, you've got news, and where there's news there has to be a top-level investigation."

"Sure. But there must be more to it than . . . Let's have it, Marty."

He took his time about answering.

"What's been bothering me is this," he said finally. "According to the assistant manager, the corpse used to be the brother of one of the hotel's permanent guests. A female guest. Does that sound like run-of-the-mill stuff to you?"

I said it didn't. I agreed that it sounded like something the newspapers would be likely to go for in a big way. I said, "But whatever goes on in a neighbourhood like this is bound to be refined."

"Hm-m!" he said skeptically. "Killing ain't ever refined. Maybe they all use high-class spray deodorant—poof! and you're sanitary for twenty-four hours. But it still stinks."

"Meaning . . .?" I prompted.

"Meaning I've got a hunch we're stepping into a mess: a real big-league 14-karat mess."

Marty Walsh had never been more right.

2

ON BOTH SIDES OF THE MIRAMONTE CANYON road mansions rubbed shoulders with residences which were no more than palatial. They nestled behind broad, velvety, exquisitely manicured lawns, protected by high hedges, tall trees and well-kept flower beds. Lights shone from windows of dens and living rooms, house numbers were hung on wrought-iron posts, mail-boxes were fixed up fancy as outdoor jewel cases. There wasn't a residence on that road, north of Sunset, which wouldn't have been a steal at \$50,000 and some of them had nicked their owners at least twice that. I didn't have to case each house to know that the majority boasted swimming pools. I figured it'd be a wonderful place to live after I made a million dollars.

We came to a turnoff where we picked up a sign which said, "Miramonte Hotel." Through the trees and shrubs you could see a lot of lights—not too bright—against a background of mountain. We followed an arrow which courteously pointed the direction and entered the sprawling grounds of the magnificent establishment.

Everything was bigger than it appeared at first glance. It was subdued and dim except in the area behind the main building where the tennis courts were located. The lights were on there. They were also on at the pool, but not as brilliantly.

We spotted our objective without half trying. It was one of the cottages lying to the northwest of the two-story main

building, right on the edge of the pool-and-cabaña area. It was marked for us by the presence of two black-and-white police patrol cars and what we correctly identified as a detective car from West L.A. Division. The only reason we spotted the latter was that it wasn't a Cadillac, Buick, Chrysler, or Jaguar. It was a car for the common people, and under these circumstances, that had to mean police.

The three official cars were crowded in front of a hotel cottage which bore the number 16. Two uniform cops were on duty outside and two other men, obviously detectives, were standing in the doorway. There were also thirty or forty other people hanging around and buzzing with excitement.

A sinewy, rangy guy walked up to us as we stepped out of our car. His quiet, drawling voice—reminiscent of the Wisconsin rural districts—held a welcoming note. It said, “Hi, Marty. Hi, Danny.”

We shook hands with Detective Lieutenant Bert Lane. Marty gave him a friendly poke in the gut and asked him what he was doing there. Bert said, “I’m temporarily night watch commander at West L.A.”

“You were at Hollywood the last time we worked together.”

“I’ve been around since then, Marty. Six months in the Business Office, a stretch at Wilshire, now here.” He beckoned to his partner, a tall, handsome young detective with prematurely gray hair. “You know Sergeant Gram, don’t you?”

We said we did. Marty observed that it was beginning to look like Old Home Week. He said it was getting so a working policeman couldn’t get busy on a case without shaking other cops out of his hair. Bert Lane said, “You won’t have any trouble shaking us on this deal, Marty. It’s a bitch.”

“How come?”

“Too many people know too much. Not enough people know enough.”

Marty said, “What’s the scoop so far, Bert?”

Lane said, “Simple enough, on the surface. It happened in this cottage: Number 16. The victim was named Clive Barton. Shot through the heart. I’ve called the coroner and the crime lab. They’ll be here any time now.”

"Yeh," nodded Marty. "Maybe." Then he asked, "What time did it happen?"

"The body was discovered at about nine-thirty. It probably happened anywhere from a half-hour to an hour before that."

"What's this about the victim being somebody's brother?"

"His sister is named Sandra Barton. She's been a guest of the Miramonte for about six months."

"She and her brother?"

"No. Miss Barton was living alone in the cottage. Clive—that's the brother—was living with their father in the Maybank apartments on Franklin Avenue. I phoned Hollywood and they've got two men stationed there so things won't be disturbed before you shake the place down."

"Nice goin'." Marty lighted a cigarette. "Miss Barton lives in this cottage—Number 16?"

"No. In seventeen: the one next door."

We glanced at the adjoining place. It looked exactly like Number 16, except that it was full of people. They looked frightened and shocked. Two or three were carrying highball glasses, but they didn't seem to be doing much about them. Lane said there had been a big party going in Number 17.

"Party." Marty Walsh turned that over in his mind. "Drinks. Radio. Impromptu dancing. Right?"

"Right."

"I hate to ask the next question, Bert, because already I know the answer. Did anybody hear the shot?"

Lane smiled slightly and shook his head.

"They never do," said Walsh bitterly. "But at least we're better off than if we'd found a half-dozen people who said they heard it and thought it was an automobile backfiring."

Lane said, "It was quite a party. Started about six o'clock this evening with swimming and drinks. Then a buffet supper. Then music and dancing. Then murder."

"A good time was had by all. Now let me get this straight: Miss Sandra Barton lives in Number 17. The killing occurred in Number 16. What was Clive Barton doing there?"

"Nobody has come up with an answer to that one."

"When was he last seen at the party in Cottage 17?"

"He wasn't there."

"The brother of the hostess? How come not?"

"He wasn't invited."

"Any idea why?"

Bert Lane shrugged. "Ask that question a dozen times, Marty, and you'll get a dozen different answers. Some say he was a prime louse. Others say he was a drunk. Others, that he was psycho. What it all adds up to is that he wasn't any prize package for anybody's party."

"Who found the body?"

"The gal who lives in Number 16. Maybe you'll recognize the name: Margaret Graham."

"Not the dame who's got that dress-designing racket?"

"That's the one. But I wouldn't call it a racket, Marty. She's supposed to be some sort of a genius. Say your wife wants a couple of dresses. She visits Margaret Graham. Miss Graham studies her figure, her coloring, her personality. Then she does a series of sketches—designing dresses for that particular customer. She supervises the making. I understand she gets as much as three hundred smackers for a single design."

Marty said, "That ain't my wife you're talking about, Bert. My wife pays tops of \$39.50 with the design thrown in for free."

"Margaret Graham's clients—not customers, Marty: with her it's clients—want special service and individual design. If they're beautiful, they want to be more so. If they're fat and dumpy, they want to look slim and attractive. Most of all they want to look different from all other women. They have the time and they have the money."

"Women!" Marty shrugged impatiently. "And what do they get out of it? The good-looking ones still get whistled at, the homely ones still miss out. So what good does it do? Do they wear a sign over the left breast saying 'This dress was designed by the famous Margaret Graham and it cost a hunk of dough'? Do they?"

"Practically. I'll lay six, two and even that when a female is wearing a Margaret Graham design, she lets that fact be known within five minutes. Otherwise, what's in it for her?"

Up to now Marty had just been shooting the breeze while

getting his thoughts lined up. His next question came faster as the essentials commenced to stand out.

"So Clive Barton, well-known louse, is shot and killed in the expensive cottage of Miss Margaret Graham. And where was Miss Graham before she discovered the deceased gent?"

"At Sandra Barton's party."

"Sounds cosy. Why did she trot back to her own place if she was having such a good time at Sandra's?"

"I haven't dug into that, Marty. It's all yours."

"Where do I begin?"

Bert Lane shrugged. "That's one I haven't figured out. But I'll say this: you'll find Margaret Graham interesting."

Marty described a lavish figure 8 in the air. "That way?"

Bert imitated the gesture, but it was a much more slender figure 8 that he made. "It's what you mean," he grinned, "only not so much of it as you're thinking."

Lieutenant Walsh nodded and Lane walked over to the crowd in front of Cottage 17. He came back with a woman and a man.

Margaret Graham was precisely what you'd expect her to look like provided you'd been expecting someone who reeked of class. My guess was that she was about twenty-six. She was of about average height and I could see for sure that she had soft, light brown hair, fair complexion, and hazel eyes. She was trying to keep herself under control and doing a fair job of it, but even a blind man could see that she'd been under a terrific strain.

Bert Lane performed the introductions. Miss Graham said that she was happy to meet Lieutenant Walsh, but she didn't sound happy or look happy. Walsh eyed her closely without appearing to do so, then spoke to the man who had come along with her. He said, "Who are you?"

The man took his time about answering. Then he said, "I'm Alan Rogers."

"What are you to Miss Graham?"

Rogers' face flushed slightly. He said slowly, "Among other things, I'm her attorney."

"That all?"

"Isn't that enough, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know. I'm just asking."

The men regarded each other with some suggestion of hostility. Marty's attitude, I could understand. I'd seen him go far by needling a person.

But this Alan Rogers . . . I didn't see where he had any call getting on his ear. He showed resentment, and resentment didn't seem to be in order—not just then, it didn't.

He was just under six feet in height and I estimated he'd tip the beam at about 175 pounds. His eyes were a deeper shade of brown than Margaret Graham's, and he was dressed conservatively. Also, it was obvious that while he might be Miss Graham's attorney, he also had a somewhat more personal interest.

Walsh said abruptly, "I want to talk to Miss Graham alone."

"As her lawyer, I . . ."

"As her lawyer you can tell her that she doesn't have to answer a single question. But also as her lawyer, you might pause to consider that that wouldn't look so good."

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm not driving at anything, mister. I'm investigating a homicide and I want to find out all I can about it. That's my job: that's what I get paid for. And I don't want you listening in while I question Miss Graham. Whether she tells me anything is up to her."

Rogers hesitated briefly. After a long time he said, "You might as well talk to them, Margaret. They'd jump to wrong conclusions if you refused."

His eyes again clashed with Marty's. Then he turned sharply and walked back to the group standing in front of Number 17. It was apparent that he wasn't too happy about the situation, and certainly he hadn't wanted to leave Miss Graham alone with us.

Marty picked up the ball where Alan Rogers had left it. But his manner was now gentle and his tone friendly. He said, "Rogers is right, Miss Graham. You are not required, at present, to answer a single question. My advice to you, however, is to be as cooperative as possible. This is a preliminary

investigation. We'll get a lot of answers from a lot of people. We'd prefer to get some of them from you—and to get them straight." He gave her one of his rare, warm smiles and she responded to it. She said, "I understand, Lieutenant. I'll try to tell you what I know."

"Good." Marty started his interrogation: slowly, carefully, quietly, reassuringly.

"You were at Miss Sandra Barton's party, Miss Graham?"

"Yes."

"You and she are close friends?"

"Very."

"Around nine-thirty tonight you returned to your own cottage?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Sandra had more guests than she anticipated. She needed some more glasses and a few plates. She was going to get them from Room Service, but I offered her some of mine. So I walked into my cottage—"

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"And then . . . ?"

"I—I found . . . him."

"Who?"

"Clive Barton."

"How did you find him?"

She made a couple of false starts before pulling herself together. The process of re-creating the scene was obviously painful, and Marty gave her plenty of time. Finally she spoke in a low, husky voice which somehow blended with her appearance of ultra sophistication.

"I went to my cottage. I snapped the light switch just inside my front door."

"Was the door locked?"

"No. I seldom lock it unless I'm going to be away from the hotel: like when I go to work, for instance."

"Then anybody could have walked in?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead, please. You turned on the light . . ."

"I saw Clive lying on a four-by-eight throw rug in front of my rosewood desk in the sitting room. At first I thought he was drunk . . ."

"Why did you think that?"

"He was rather a heavy drinker. . . . I've seen him drunk several times. I didn't like what I saw."

"Had he been drinking heavily at the party?"

"He wasn't there. Sandra made a point of assuring me that she hadn't invited him."

"Why?"

Margaret Graham flushed. "It's difficult," she explained, "saying unpleasant things about someone who is dead. It seems unnecessarily cruel. . . ."

"Not unnecessary. Let's just say it is difficult. Now then, why didn't Miss Barton invite her brother? Why did she take the trouble of telling you that Clive wouldn't be there?"

"Because . . . well, he had been unpleasant . . . to me."

"In what way?"

"He'd been . . ." She was groping for the right words. I knew she wanted to say "making passes," but that didn't seem to fit in with her glacial correctness. "He was the amorous type."

"In love with you?"

"I don't think he was in love with anybody, Lieutenant. I believe—this is just a guess—that he had an inferiority complex where women were concerned. He pawed at anything female. He was . . . he was . . ."

"Obnoxious?"

"That's as good a word as any."

"Tell me more," prompted Marty.

"Sandra knew I didn't like her brother. She knew I wouldn't attend her party if he was there, especially after what happened yesterday."

"Yes . . . ?"

"Last night, to be exact. Clive and I happened to be alone. His hands got out of control. . . ." Again she flushed. "You know what I mean, don't you, Lieutenant?"

Marty said, Yes, he knew. He looked straight at me when he said it, and there was mockery in his eyes. There's always been a running gag between Marty and me: he says I'm always prospecting, never satisfied until I find out whether a new dame will or won't. He's wrong, of course, but it's his idea of something to kid me about.

"So," prompted Marty, "you and Clive Barton were together last night. He had a little friendly feeling . . . Oh! I'm sorry, Miss Graham. Believe me, I'm sorry. I should pick my words more carefully."

I was looking at Marty with fresh interest. He'd made that crude break intentionally. Everything Marty did and said when he was on a case was intentional. I wondered what he had been probing for. Maybe he had figured that Margaret Graham wasn't what I had pegged her for: Miss Deep Freeze of 1953.

Anyway, Marty continued to apologize for his wisecrack and Margaret Graham graciously accepted his apology, though in the very manner of her acceptance she made it clear that such crudities were to be expected from policemen.

Marty wasted a few minutes smoothing her down and then got back to the principal subject. He said, "You saw Clive Barton lying on a throw rug in front of a rosewood desk in your sitting room. You thought he was drunk. How did you find out different?"

"I walked toward the desk. There was lots of blood on the throw rug. Then I saw the gun."

"Where?"

"On the floor. About two feet from his right hand."

"What sort of a gun?"

"A .22-caliber Colt Woodsman."

Marty did a take on that. He said quietly, "You're mighty observant, Miss Graham."

"No." She shook her head. "I recognized the gun. It's mine."

"Oh . . ." Marty let it hang there for a while, indicating that this was unfinished business. "Where was the gun usually kept?"

"In one of the drawers of my rosewood desk."

"Why did you find it advisable to keep a gun?"

"I didn't. Alan Rogers gave it to me months ago. He's my

lawyer. Occasionally we'd take long drives into the desert and do some target shooting."

"Are you a good shot?"

"For a woman—yes. But I didn't shoot Clive Barton, if that's what you're driving at. He was dead when I walked into the cottage."

"What's in your cottage besides the sitting room, Miss Graham?"

"A bedroom, bath, kitchenette, and dining nook."

"Did you see any indications that Barton had been in any of those other rooms?"

"No. They tell me I screamed: I don't know whether I did or not. Then I rushed back to Sandra's and told her about finding Clive dead in my sitting room. Several people heard me. There was lots of excitement. Someone telephoned the manager."

Marty said carefully, "If you entered your own home, Miss Graham—and even though you only rent it, it's still legally your home—and if you found an intruder who had previously made improper advances . . . well, you might have been justified in shooting him, especially if anything else—"

"It wasn't that way," she interrupted. "He was dead when I walked into the cottage."

Bert Lane, who up to now had been a quiet and mildly interested spectator, broke in on the interrogation. He said, "Barton was lying right in front of the rosewood desk in your sitting room, Miss Graham?"

She looked up at the long tall muscular figure of the West L.A. night watch detective commander. "Yes," she answered slowly. "I said that twice."

"He was near the desk where you kept the gun you saw lying near his body?"

"Yes."

"He was on a little rug, and there was lots of blood on the rug?"

Margaret Graham made a gesture of annoyance. She said, "I don't see why you keep harping on that, Officer. I told you how it was."

"I just wanted to be sure." Lane was mildly apologetic. "Sometimes I don't get things straight the first time." •

Marty Walsh had backed away from the conversation. He had worked with Bert Lane before, and held Bert in high esteem. The lanky detective wasn't the type to hammer on a simple matter unless it was important.

"Miss Graham"—Bert Lane was still at the reins—"is yours a furnished cottage?"

"Yes."

"Everything in it except your personal possessions belongs to the hotel?"

"Not everything. A couple of pictures belong to me. Also two valuable pre-Wedgwood vases. And the rosewood desk is mine."

The rosewood desk! It was odd how insistent Margaret Graham was about that. And she never just called it "the desk." It was always "the rosewood desk."

"That," pursued Bert Lane relentlessly, "is the desk in the sitting room that Barton was lying on the rug in front of?"

"Yes."

"Sorry," said Lieutenant Lane. "I never should of ended a sentence with a preposition, should I?"

I could see that the girl was angry. She turned back to Marty Walsh, as though for help, but Lane hadn't quite finished with her.

"You seen Barton like you told us," he hammered, sticking doggedly to his bad grammar, "and then you rushed back to Sandra's cottage, leaving everything just like it was? Not touching nothing?"

"Precisely."

"And now, there's one more thing. . . ." Bert Lane looked straight at Marty Walsh. "Look, Marty," he said in his slow, drawling voice. "How's about giving Miss Graham a little rest? I got a couple of uniform boys standing by, and me and Don Gram have looked around inside. "Why don't you leave me take you on a little tour, and come back to Miss Graham later?"

Walsh never changed expression. He knew that Bert Lane had latched onto something and that he wanted to get it across to Marty where Margaret Graham couldn't overhear.

Marty checked right into the play. He sent Margaret back to her friends in Cottage 17 and he and Bert Lane started for Number 16. Sergeant Gram and I followed.

Marty said, "Nobody could be as dumb as you sounded, Bert. Not even you. What's on the fire?"

Bert was smiling. "Will you be surprised, Lieutenant Walsh: will you ever be surprised."

"At what?"

"Things. Remember, I looked around inside when I first got here. Nobody but us cops has entered that cottage. You want to see Clive Barton lying dead on the four-by-eight throw rug in front of the rosewood desk in the sitting room?"

"Yes."

"Well," stated Bert Lane, "you won't. And why? Because this, Mister Marty Walsh . . . Clive Barton ain't lying on any little throw rug in front of the rosewood desk. His body is right where it was discovered: on the bed in the bedroom. And there ain't no throw rug of any sort I could discover. And what's more, the gun ain't in the sitting room. It's right on the bed alongside of what used to be Mr. Clive Barton."

3

MARTY WALSH said he'd be damned. That made it two of us.

Either Margaret Graham had been lying from the first or somebody had walked into the cottage after Clive Barton's demise and loused things up. And if that were the case, the case wasn't simple any more. You could bet your bottom dollar that we weren't dealing with any justifiable homicide, or exclusively with one suspect.

This thing, in my book, was labeled murder—with a capital M.

The inside of the cottage was classy and expensive. It was just what you'd expect for \$28 per day. There was everything the

average man couldn't afford: good taste, unobtrusive furnishing, spotless cleanliness, and a haunting fragrance that seemed to spell Margaret Graham.

The sitting room ran the length of the cottage, its big picture window at the rear overlooking the swimming pool and, beyond that, the tennis courts and an enormous, well-tended green for clock golf. The night was unusually warm for California, where the nights are generally on the cool side, and I could see a couple of dozen folks gathered around the pool, attracted—I believed—by the proximity of homicide. They could sit in the canvas chairs and loll on the couches and pretend they were interested in the beautiful landscaping, but I observed that most of them were staring in the direction of Cottages 16 and 17.

Margaret Graham's cottage, like all the other cottages and the main building itself, was of modified Spanish design: not the grotesque, overdone architecture which prevailed in the mid-Twenties, but a tasteful simplification of it.

Miramonte, if my high-school Spanish teacher hadn't been kidding, translated roughly into "Behold the mountain." Well, that was a cinch. From any window in the joint you could behold all the mountains you craved. And you could also behold other things, too: men and women who were old, middle-aged, and young; an occasional maid, a less occasional bellhop. There was a big parking lot in back of the main building where casual callers rested their expensive cars, and sojourners in the main building regularly kept theirs. If you rented a cottage, you could—and usually did—keep your car parked on the roadway directly in front, or in the tiny private area in the rear of each individual building. It was the sort of setup where people could come and go without attracting attention.

Marty Walsh and Bert Lane went straight to the rosewood desk. It was an attractive piece of furniture designed along Chippendale lines, and looked to be serviceable as well as decorative. Below a narrow ledge which could be used for writing letters there were two desk-width drawers. The back of the desk was higher by about fourteen inches. Obviously, it contained compartments for stationery, letters, bills or what-have-you. There were two doors to this upper portion of the

desk, one on each side of center. There was a key in the left door.

But there wasn't any throw rug in front of the desk. We examined closely and could guess by the faint film of dust which is inevitable on any floor that there had been a rug of just about the size Margaret Graham mentioned. At what had probably been one end of the rug, the dust had been disturbed in a way that looked as though someone had moved that rug suddenly but carefully.

"Why?" I asked as we all straightened up.

Marty said, "If I could answer that, Danny, I could probably answer everything."

"It couldn't have been just because there was blood on it, could it?"

"Not likely. But there could have been something else."

"Like what?"

"Something that would have indicated a struggle, or some tiny scrap of evidence that might identify the person who shot Clive Barton. But what I'm wondering is where the rug is now: who took it where and when and why?" Marty spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. "Murders always seem to be this way. I don't know why some killer doesn't sell tickets and invite an audience—including a half-dozen dicks. It'd make detecting so much easier."

We walked into the bedroom. You couldn't mistake that its tenant was feminine: cosmetics on the dresser, a hanging closet full of dresses and negligees that looked inexpensive and must have cost plenty, even for a dame who was in the clothes-designing business. There was a little shoe closet containing a couple of dozen pairs of shoes ranging from bedroom slippers to evening footwear, all of a size, all indicating the same owner, all looking new or nearly new. There were two photographs on the dresser, one of Alan Rogers, whom we already had met, and the other of a nice-looking guy who was identified only by the inscription on the bottom of the picture, "To Margaret from Jim with love." Strictly feminine—all of it. All of it, that is, except the bed.

The bed was of a quiet gray tone—I think it's called hair-

wood—and it matched the rest of the furniture. It was a nice-looking bed, a comfortable double. It looked like a bit of furniture on which one could enjoy oneself if one were in the mood, which usually one was. But at the moment nobody was having fun, especially on the bed. That's where the ex-Clive Barton was lying.

You didn't have to look twice to convince yourself that Mr. Barton was completely defunct. Without disturbing the body more than was absolutely necessary, we established that whoever had shot him had done an expert job. The bullet must have gone right through the heart. Bert Lane took a look at the gun, handling it with scrupulous care, and then he went back to the living room and returned with an empty shell which he turned over to Marty.

"That was under a chair in the sitting room," he said. "Must have rolled there after being ejected. Long rifle cartridge. Plenty of punch in these modern .22's."

They found no powder burns on young Barton's clothes, indicating that the gun was not too close to him when the lethal shot had been fired . . . and also virtually eliminating the probability that Clive had bumped himself off. We examined the floor in both the rooms, and Marty delivered the verdict.

"I figure that a lot of what Miss Graham said was on the level," he stated. "Unless I'm wrong, the bullets in that gun are hollow-nosed. If Barton had been on, or near, the bed when he was shot, there would have been a lot more blood.

"I'd take an oath that the body wasn't dragged in here. If the shooting took place by that rosewood desk, and if he flopped there, someone picked him up, carried him in here, and placed him carefully on the bed. Margaret Graham couldn't have done that."

We looked down at the young man. He was about five-eight in height and must have weighed a full 165 pounds, which would be too much of an armful even for a successful dress designer like Miss Graham.

We guessed Barton's age at about twenty-five. He was well built and well muscled. His hair was a soft, silky blond; his complexion matched. Alive, he could have been called a pretty

boy, though he didn't look feminine. There was still a faint aroma of alcohol in his vicinity, which checked with the statement that he was inclined to drink too often and too much. The only thing wrong with him were two slight bruises: one near the left eye and one on his jaw.

"The boy," said Marty, "must have been in a fight. Not tonight, though . . . the bruises are not new. We can keep our eyes open for a man who knows how to punch with his right. Maybe that can be your job, Danny." He grinned at me. "Line up all the men in the vicinity and let each one of them sock you with his right. Estimate the power of each punch, and match your jaw and eye with our corpus delicti." His tone changed abruptly. "I don't like it. I don't like it even a little bit.

"My guess still is that Margaret Graham's story is at least partly true. But I'll also bet my pet lollipop that some man was in here with her at the time or immediately afterward."

"And if she lied," I suggested, "it would be to protect him?"

"Could be. Though it doesn't make sense. If someone was going to dispose of the body, why didn't he do a good job of it? Why pick Barton up and make him nice and comfy on the bed? Why not leave him lay where he fell? And don't say they wanted to get him off the throw rug so as to take the rug away. They could have done that by rolling him over."

Carefully he went through the pockets of Clive Barton. He found the usual things: handkerchief, wallet containing about three hundred dollars in fives, tens, and twenties; driver's license, a parking ticket, a handsome gold cigarette case with matching lighter, a ballpoint fountain pen which might or might not have been gold, a bunch of about a dozen keys, another key not attached to the ring. Marty held this single key in the palm of his hand and frowned over it.

"Looks familiar," he said to himself. "I wonder . . ."

He returned to the sitting room, holding the unattached key. We followed. Walsh went straight to the rosewood desk and held the key up alongside a similar key which was in the lock of the left door. He said: "They look exactly the same. Let's see."

He slipped the key into the door on the right of the upper section of the desk. It fitted. He opened the door, glanced at the stuff inside without examining each item, then shook his head again.

"Why two keys?" he asked.

Bert Lane turned the key that was in the left door of the desk. It worked. He closed and locked it, then withdrew the key. He said, "Let me see that one, Marty."

Walsh handed him the desk key he had found in Clive Barton's pocket. Bert took the key out of the left door and inserted the one Walsh had just given him. It didn't work. Then he tried the key to the left door in the lock of the right one. That didn't work, either. He put the left key back where he had found it and returned the other to Walsh.

"Different locks," he said. "Different keys."

"Why?"

"Expensive desk. You' gotta get something additional for your money."

Marty snorted. "Be yourself, feller. Different keys or not—they're simple. The locks are weak. Either of these doors could be forced with a fifteen-cent screwdriver."

"True enough," agreed Lieutenant Lane.

We made a thorough search of the cottage. We found everything we would have expected to find and nothing that we hoped for . . . nothing, that is, to give us a tie-in with the killing. I felt almost suffocated by the atmosphere of correctness. I figured that what had just happened would be very upsetting to an orderly, precise mind. Miss Graham couldn't possibly like a dead body occupying her bed. And that thought led to another: Would she like a man's body in her bed if he wasn't dead?

From outside came a lot of automobile noises: men from the crime lab with all their equipment, plus three cars containing reporters and photographers. The man from the coroner's office hadn't shown up yet.

Bert Lane stepped outside to brief the reporters on what little he knew of the story thus far, and to keep them from boiling over until they could get their own look-see. Marty welcomed

the crime-lab boys and dived into a description of Margaret Graham's story of the finding of the body, and then he showed where the body was at the moment. What he wanted, he told them, was anything that might indicate when or how the body was moved, whether there were any scraps of wool from the missing throw rug for possible future comparison. The fingerprints he took for granted: they would dust all over the place. It looked like they'd be busy for quite a while.

Marty stationed himself in the dining nook where he puffed on an unlighted cigarette and occasionally shook his head. I joined him and said, "How do you like it, Marty?"

"I don't."

"You got any ideas?"

"Yeh." He looked at me levelly. "My first idea is that it's murder. The second idea is that we've got a million people more or less to interrogate, which means our night is all shot to hell. And third . . ."

"Yes . . . ?"

"I want to have a real long serious talk with Margaret Graham. I think she knows a lot more than she's told us."

"How do you react to her, Marty?"

"I don't." He chose his next words carefully. "She's a cool cookie. She may be trying to cover something—or someone. I propose to find out who and why."

4

MARTY HAD HIS SECOND TALK with Margaret Graham on a patch of lawn opposite the front of Cottage 17. I listened in on it. He also invited Bert Lane, but that observant gentleman begged off. He said he and his partner, Sergeant Gram, would circulate among the crowd at Number 17 and see what scraps of information they could glean. The deputy coroner finally arrived and was briefed by Walsh and Lane. Then he and the technical boys took complete charge of Number 16.

Margaret Graham said she was willing to talk, but she asked permission for Alan Rogers, her lawyer, to be in on it. Marty hesitated—and then surprised me by saying Yes. The four of us stationed ourselves out of earshot of the assembled multitude and Marty dealt the cards.

He said, "We've run into something that doesn't check with your story of finding the body, Miss Graham. You say you saw Clive Barton lying dead on a little throw rug which was in front of the rosewood desk in your sitting room. You stated that a gun belonging to you, a .22-caliber Colt Woodsman automatic, was near his body. You told us that, after making certain Barton was dead, you returned to Cottage 16 and told them what you had discovered, and that the hotel management was notified. Right?"

"That's correct, Lieutenant. Why is it necessary to repeat?"

"Because, Miss Graham, that wasn't the way we found things. We found Clive Barton lying on your bed. We saw no sign of any throw rug such as you describe. The gun was in the cottage, all right, but it was in the bedroom with Clive Barton."

He stopped talking, letting his words hang in the air between them. Margaret was the first to speak. She said, "That isn't possible, Lieutenant. I saw precisely what I told you I saw. I never touched the body except to make sure Clive was dead. I don't believe—"

Alan Rogers broke in, his manner slightly less than hostile, but definitely unfriendly. He said, "What is this, Walsh—some sort of a police trick?"

"No," answered Marty easily. "I don't play tricks."

"Then how . . . ?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out, Mr. Rogers." He turned back to Margaret Graham. "What time did you find the body?" he asked.

"Approximately nine-thirty."

"How long were you in the cottage at that time?"

"Three or four minutes: no longer."

"Did you return there later?"

"Certainly not."

"There was lots of excitement among the guests when you broke the news?"

"Naturally."

"Did you see anybody go into Number 16 between then and the time the first patrol car got here?"

"No."

"Could anybody have gone in there without you seeing?"

"Certainly." She made an impatient gesture. "You can see for yourself the location of the two cottages, Lieutenant. Anyone could have gone in through the back door without my seeing them. Someone from Sandra's cottage or someone from the main building. Or any one of the guests who were walking around the grounds or lounging about the swimming pool."

"How would casual guests have known about what had happened?"

"They knew, all right. The folks at the party were excited. I believe some of them left the cottage, though I don't know who. Word must have been passed—either by some of Sandra's guests or by the hotel manager. I'm sure everybody knew about it."

"What were you doing all that time?"

"I was with Sandra and her father. Clive was her brother, remember—and he was Mr. Barton's son. I tried to do what I could to cushion the shock."

I broke in. "Didn't either Mr. Barton or this Sandra you mention visit the cottage after you broke the news?"

"No."

"What makes you so sure?"

She flicked me with a contemptuous glance. "Because I was with them all the time."

"Didn't it strike you as peculiar that the father and sister of a young man who had just been killed would make no attempt to look at the body?"

Alan Rogers said, "I was responsible for that. Both Sandra and Mr. Barton started for Cottage 16 the instant they heard what had happened. I stopped them."

"Why?"

"Because I knew the police were due. I thought it would be

best to let you fellows find things exactly as Margaret found them."

Marty said dryly, "Very cooperative, Mr. Rogers. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. Either Miss Graham told it wrong or somebody visited that cottage, moved the body and the gun, and disposed of the throw rug."

"I can't figure why."

"Neither can I. Whoever it was could have been trying to bitch up the investigation."

"Who would want to do that?"

"The killer, for one. I can't figure anything that could be more helpful to him—or her—than to have us find things different from the way Miss Graham claims they were."

Marty stopped talking, so I picked up the ball. That's the way we always work. I asked, "How long was it, Miss Graham, between the time you told your story to the guests in Cottage 17 and the time when the police got here?"

"I haven't any idea."

"Just about a half-hour." That was Alan Rogers again.

"You seem quite positive, Mr. Rogers."

"I am. I could be five or ten minutes off in my estimate, but not more than that."

"Where were you during that half-hour?"

"With Miss Graham and the Bartons part of the time. Mixing around with the others at the party."

"But you never left Number 17?"

"I certainly did. I saw the assistant manager coming toward the cottage from the direction of the main building. I intercepted him at the pool and asked him about reporting to the police. He said he'd already done that. He seemed quite excited."

"That assistant manager," broke in Marty Walsh. "Is he a swish?"

"A what?"

"A swish. A queer, a fruit, a pansy." Walsh put his right hand on his hip and gave a little wiggle. "You know, Mr. Rogers . . . one of the girls?"

Rogers flushed angrily. "I don't see . . ."

"I'm not claiming you would know for *sure*." Marty put a deliberately insulting emphasis on the last word. "But you've been around: you know the score. I understand even the birds and bees get that way once in a while."

"I don't understand," snapped the attorney, "why you have to go out of your way to be vulgar."

"No trouble at all," Marty assured him. "It comes natural to me."

He was building up to something. I'd seen him work before. Make the average man angry and he won't keep his tongue under control. He said, "Did you know Clive Barton very well, Mr. Rogers?"

"I knew him. Margaret and Sandra Barton have become close friends. They were back and forth in each other's cottages all the time when both were at home. It was inevitable that I should often meet Clive."

"But you didn't like him, did you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Does there have to be a reason, Lieutenant? A man either likes another man or he doesn't. I didn't like Clive Barton."

I had been keeping a close eye on Margaret Graham while Marty and Rogers were swapping rhetoric. I could see that she had become more nervous, more ill at ease. Twice she started to say something: each time she changed her mind. I barged into the conversation again. I said, "Tell me, Miss Graham: how well did you know Clive Barton?"

"He was Sandra's brother. . . ."

"But in spite of that, you didn't like him. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I didn't care for him."

"Now look: going back to your original story . . . Mr. Rogers can assure you that if you entered your cottage alone and found an intruder there, and if—being frightened—you shot him, the verdict would unquestionably be justifiable homicide. More particularly if you found him in your bedroom. That'd make the whole thing simple, don't you see?"

"I don't see," she retorted coldly. "I didn't find any intruder."

I found the dead body of a man. I found it exactly as I described it to you."

I sighed with disappointment. I had had a slight hope that she'd fall for the out I was offering. And I had thought that if she did, I'd have something. She wouldn't have known about the shell that had been automatically ejected from the gun in the sitting room. Well, I had made my pitch and it had failed to pay off. I backed away, but not before asking another casual question to cover my real purpose.

"When we looked at the body of Clive Barton," I said, "we noticed a bruise under his left eye and one on the left side of his jaw. Had you seen those?"

"No. . . ." She hesitated a long time and I knew I had unexpectedly hit pay dirt. "I hadn't seen the bruises, but I know how he must have gotten them."

I waited, dividing my attention between the girl and Alan Rogers. He, too, seemed nervous.

"Yesterday," she explained carefully, "there was some trouble. In my cottage."

"Don't tell me that you socked Barton!"

"She didn't," Alan Rogers was again horning in, his voice harsh, his manner belligerent. "I did."

"Oh . . . Why?"

"Clive Barton was drunk—as usual." Rogers was talking fast, almost too fast. He was talking as though he wanted us to believe every word he was saying. "He followed Margaret into her cottage. He had been his usual obnoxious self. I trailed after them. He was pawing at her. I stepped in."

"And then . . . ?"

"We had a brief fight. I hit him at least twice: once in the eye and once on the left side of the jaw. He folded."

Marty's eyes met mine and he gave me a brief nod of approval. Later, I was going to get credit for having led up to this revelation quite cleverly. But that hadn't been the way it was. I had stumbled onto it by sheer accident. I said something about the fact that Rogers obviously packed a good punch, and he favored me with a glance of disapproval. He was definitely not in the mood for compliments about his pugilistic prowess.

Marty Walsh said, "So you and Clive Barton battled yesterday because he was making passes at Miss Graham in Miss Graham's cottage. Tonight Clive's sister threw a party but didn't invite her brother. Would there possibly be any connection there, Mr. Rogers?"

"There might. Sandra loves her brother, but she's under no illusions about him. When Margaret and I were invited, Sandra assured us that Clive would not be present."

"But later tonight," persisted Marty, "Miss Graham returned to her cottage alone. She encountered Clive Barton. We don't know for sure where you were at the time, or what happened in Miss Graham's cottage. But it's possible . . ."

"It's not possible," snapped Alan Rogers. "And if you're trying to tie Miss Graham or myself up with Clive Barton's death, you're being a bigger damn' fool than I took you for."

Marty didn't get angry. Instead, he nodded and bestowed a genial smile on the attorney.

"Maybe," he said, "maybe you've got something there, Mr. Rogers. It might be that I am."

But his manner, his tone, impressed me. At the moment Lieutenant Marty Walsh was satisfied with the way things were going.

5

RANK DOESN'T COUNT FOR MUCH in the Detective Bureau. There aren't any chevrons or bars to act as reminders.

But once in a while the senior detective on a case will assign a special job to someone working with him, and when he does there's nothing to do but obey. That's why I didn't put up any holler when Marty Walsh informed me that I had drawn the job of interrogating Sandra Barton and her father.

Sandra's cottage looked just the same as Margaret Graham's,

from the outside, anyway. I shoved through a highly articulate crowd and pushed open the front door. A half-dozen people were in the sitting room. I introduced myself and said I'd like to talk to Miss and Mr. Barton—alone. Somewhat reluctantly, four of the folks departed, leaving me with a compact, distinguished-looking man who appeared to be somewhere in his early fifties, and a girl. . . .

I know that a working cop is supposed to regard every person connected with a homicide investigation in a clinical and impersonal manner. You're supposed to display a proper awareness of the tragedy which has befallen them. But I'm still betting that there isn't a cop in the United States who could look at Sandra Barton and fail to feel the sap rising in his veins.

She was sitting on a couch in front of the fireplace. Ellis Barton, her father, was seated beside her, holding her hand. It was apparent that neither of them had even started to recover from the shock of Clive Barton's death.

They were quiet, reserved, and dignified. They weren't putting on any show. They weren't reaching out for sympathy. The third member of their little family was lying next door with a bullet through his heart. He could have been a good guy or he could have been a louse. But he was the son of this man and the brother of this girl, and neither of them could be expected to be conducting a cheering section.

Sandra invited me to be seated. I pulled up a chair and eased myself into it, so I was facing them. That gave me a chance to look at Sandra.

I reckon I'm no more nor less human than the average young single man. I kept reminding myself of the trouble which had just crowded in on her, but after all—it was her trouble, not mine. And, trouble or not, she was a delectable eyeful.

So I looked at her figure first. I still claim that the average man would. It was the sort of figure that you'd never forget while you were awake—and hoped you'd dream about when you went to sleep. It was the sort of figure that is supposed to have rocked empires, and I was willing to have mine rocked.

Grief or no grief, tragedy or no tragedy, the lady exuded sex. Not that she was working at it—or even aware of it. But there

it was and you could try to think of something else. You could try—

She was blond. By all the rules that should have lessened her appeal for me, because I'm blond, too. But it didn't. She was wearing a hostess gown that I discovered later was concocted of chiffon velvet in a pastel shade of green. It had long sleeves and it came all the way down to her feet, but just the same, you knew without looking that what was underneath would be worth glimpsing.

Of course, there was a hint here and there: mostly there. The gown was held together at the throat by a small brooch which could have been diamond or could have been costume. Beneath the brooch you could see the curve of firm young breasts, and the part you couldn't see you could imagine. She crossed her legs, and I caught a too brief glimpse of a slender, shapely, naked leg. She intercepted my unprofessional appraisal, and her cheeks flushed slightly. She must have been accustomed to being stared at, and maybe she would even have liked it under normal circumstances, but these circumstances weren't normal. I felt a trifle like a heel, but not so much of a heel that I wouldn't have looked again if I'd had a good chance.

She was of medium height and of a firmness which should have put her weight in the neighborhood of 120. I didn't waste time trying to guess her age, although I discovered later that it was twenty-six, which surprised me by about four years. She had the clearest complexion and the most bewitching gray-green eyes I had ever seen.

I addressed myself to Ellis Barton and expressed my sympathy. I said that I had to ask some questions and that I regretted the necessity for my intrusion. His hand tightened over that of his daughter and he answered me in a quiet, level voice.

"Don't apologize," he said. "I understand that you have a job to do."

I started off with the customary questions. He said that, as far as he knew, his son had no enemies—that is, not the sort who would seek to kill him.

"I'll be frank with you, Sergeant O'Leary," he went on.

"Clive was probably not everything that a man hopes his son might be. But he was a good boy."

"Did he drink?"

"Yes. Too much. But he wasn't an alcoholic."

"Did you see him today?"

"Naturally. He and I live together at the Maybank Apartments in Hollywood. We ate brunch together . . . you know, a late breakfast that also did duty as lunch."

"And then . . . ?"

"I came out here to Sandra's."

"Did your son come with you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Sandra and I had asked him not to come. He wasn't . . ." Mr. Barton hesitated, and then went on courageously. "He wasn't at his best at a party. He usually drank too much, and he sometimes got belligerent."

"Like yesterday?"

Sandra broke in, her voice low and husky, and as exciting as her figure. "Who told you about that?"

"About what, Miss Barton?"

She frowned. "Look, Sergeant—let's don't play games. Ask any questions you want to ask and Dad and I will try to answer them. You don't need to sneak up on them from the side."

"All right." This was the kind of talk I understood, the kind of girl I could go for in a big way. "I understand that your brother and Alan Rogers had a fight yesterday in Miss Graham's cottage."

"That's correct."

"Did you see it?"

"No. Margaret told me about it."

"What did she tell you?"

"That Clive followed her into her cottage from the swimming pool. That he . . . well . . ." She looked helplessly at her father, and Mr. Barton started carrying the ball.

"This is no time to whitewash anything," he said. "I understand that my son became much too amorous. Alan Rogers

walked in on the scene and . . . well, that's when the fight occurred."

"Was your son in love with Miss Graham?"

Barton passed the buck right back to Sandra. She said slowly, "I don't know, Sergeant. He may have been. But there were other women. . . ."

"What sort of women?"

"Female ones." She made an angry gesture, as though she were annoyed at herself. "This is a horrible position for us to be in, Sergeant. I loathe myself for making that statement that way. It sounded like a smart crack, and I'm not in the mood for joking. I was just trying to tell the truth. Clive seemed to chase all women. I could tell you different, but it wouldn't take you long to find out I was lying."

Mr. Barton broke in. "I don't believe," he said, "that Clive had much success with them. He probably had what a psychiatrist would call an inferiority complex . . . a compulsion to pursue attractive women, a need to prove that they desired him. Sandra and I feel rotten telling you these things, but . . ."

"You're both being mighty cooperative. As Miss Barton said, we'd hear it sooner or later. It's best to get it this way."

I lighted a cigarette and then fired my next question. "How come," I said, "that you, Barton, lived with your son in Hollywood and your daughter lives here at the Miramonte?"

"Damn it!" His response fairly exploded. "I don't blame you, but you've got me in an impossible position. You're asking questions that cannot be answered honestly without putting me in the position of describing my son as a thoroughly undesirable character."

"No matter whether or not he was the best guy in the world," I said soothingly, "somebody killed him. We're trying to find out who and why. We couldn't get to first base without your help. We have to know what sort of man he was if we're ever going to dig up the motive for his death."

They looked at each other and nodded. They really were helping, and I was sorry for them. I said, "Did either of you see Clive around this cottage or the hotel at any time during your party this evening?"

Both shook their heads.

"You were afraid there'd be trouble if he and Miss Graham and Alan Rogers got together again?"

"Yes."

"But we know he came anyway. We know he was killed in Miss Graham's cottage. She found the body. Or she shot him herself. It could have been either way."

Sandra rose. She said tensely, "What you're doing, you've got to do, Sergeant. Dad and I understand that. But if you're trying to insinuate that Margaret Graham is telling less than the truth, you're wrong."

I said, "Suppose she had a reason. Suppose this guy Rogers killed your brother? Suppose Miss Graham is in love with Rogers? Wouldn't that give her a reason for lying?"

Mr. Barton said, "That's asking us for a conclusion, Sergeant. All we can do is to tell you the facts."

6

WE WERE IN THE GROOVE NOW. They said they'd tell me facts, and they fed 'em to me faster than I could digest them.

We went back to the reasons Mr. Barton and Clive had been living in a Hollywood apartment while Sandra occupied a cottage at the Miramonte. Stripped of superfluous words it boiled down to the simple fact that the late Clive Barton was a nuisance. He drank, he chased women with almost psychopathic earnestness, he consorted generally with the wrong type of people and seldom with the better type. The way I pegged him, he was the sort of punk who would try anything once. I couldn't see where the world—or the Bartons—were worse off for having him removed from the scene, but I realized that the ties of blood were close. He was son and brother; the manner of his exit from this world had been abrupt and startling. Maybe the Bartons would feel lost without someone to worry about. •

They had lived in New York until moving to California about eight months previously. Mr. Barton explained that they had hoped that transplanting Clive to the bright sunshine and gay flowers of Southern California might benefit him. They had been wrong. The life here was too easy, there were too many girls in bathing suits, too many gay companions to be had if one were willing to pay the freight, too many fun spots available—places like Las Vegas, Reno, Arrowhead, Lake Tahoe, Palm Springs, semi-resort hotels like the Miramonte.

"Did he work?" I asked.

"No." Ellis Barton answered with reluctance. "Once in a while he'd take a job, but he never lasted more than a few days."

"I judge you have money?"

"I'm not wealthy, but I have enough put aside to call myself a retired businessman. Sandra has her own money. She inherited it from her mother. Clive was always hounding her for some of it."

"Wasn't Miss Barton's mother also Clive's mother?"

"Sure. But she left the bulk of her estate to Sandra. That was Clive's point: he argued that he wasn't asking Sandra for anything that wasn't his rightfully. I don't mean legally: he knew better than that . . . but as a matter of principle. He overspent the allowances he drew from his sister and from me. Sandra and I tried to be generous without giving him enough to ruin himself." His eyes closed for a moment, and he spread his hands in a hopeless, helpless gesture. "I suppose I failed as a father. But I loved my son, and if I had it to do all over again I'd probably make the same mistakes."

I said, "You and your daughter will continue to live in California?"

"Probably."

"Together?"

Ellis Barton gave me a faint smile. "I'm afraid not. I like my little apartment and Sandra likes her independence. So we'll probably carry on as we're going until we have had time to readjust."

I said that was just fine. Maybe I said it with too much

emphasis, because Sandra looked up at me and I thought I detected the faintest spark of interest. But then I told myself sternly that I was kidding myself. This kid and I played in different leagues: we were a million miles apart financially and socially. She seemed to read my thoughts because she said, "No, we're not."

"Not what?"

"As different as you think. When you've finished with us in your professional capacity, I'd like to see more of you."

Socko! That one landed right on the button and I went down for the count. "It wouldn't ever be safe," I said, with as much lightness as I could muster. "Some day we'd be out together and you'd read my mind. I wouldn't want you to get *that* mad at me."

"I wouldn't," she promised.

Boy, I told myself—you'd better fish or cut bait. This doll is in the Tiffany class. Maybe you look good to her now because you're a cop strutting in the spotlight. Once this thing smooths over you'll just be another working stiff. This Sandra isn't your dish. Oh, sure, you had a couple of years of college and you served in the armed forces. But hell, Danny—joints like the Miramonte are just where you don't belong; dames like Sandra Barton are to be looked at but not dated.

All that time she was regarding me as though she were reading over my shoulder. It gave me a funny feeling. I said, "You build a man up, Miss Barton. So you might as well know the truth about me at the outset."

"Married? Engaged?"

"Nope. But I'm a hot-dog-and-hamburger lad. I drink Western beer and 85-cent wine."

"Hamburgers," she said gently. "With all the trimmings?"

"Uh-huh."

"They're my favorite dish."

There was a good retort to that one, but I choked it back. I took out my notebook and ballpoint pen and started acting like a cop again. I took down Ellis Barton's address and telephone number. I said that before the night was over some of the boys would want to drop in at his apartment to shake it

down. He asked what I meant by that, and I explained that we'd want to inspect Clive's personal possessions in the hope that we'd find some tieup that would give us a lead! "It's routine," I told them. "I'm sure Lieutenant Walsh would be glad to have you along if you want to be."

"No." Barton shook his head. "I know you've got to do it, but I wouldn't feel happy watching."

I started asking Sandra about the party she had been throwing. I had two reasons for asking: First, I liked the sound of her voice. Second, I wanted to know.

It must have been quite an affair. It was supposed to have started at six o'clock, and Sandra wasn't clear in her own mind whether it had commenced before then or afterward. Most of the guests lived in or near the Miramonte; others were in the habit of drifting around for a dip in the pool or a spot of tennis or on the prowl for a date.

It had started off with swimming. I was sorry I had missed that portion of it. Sandra in a bathing suit was a sight I promised myself not to miss for always. Anyway, the guests had dunked themselves right merrily. By the side of the pool, Sandra had arranged with the hotel to set up a batch of assorted canapés and a special bartender had been on duty with a wagon containing all the ingredients. A quick swim, a quick snap at a canapé, a quick drink, another quick swim . . . that, I thought, was the life. Snatch a bite, snatch a swim, snatch a drink . . . the words kept rolling through my mind until they got all twisted. I almost got ashamed of myself. Almost, but not quite.

That phase of the party appeared to have continued until about seven-thirty. The guests—increased by that time by hotel residents who had horned into the festivities—slipped out of their bathing suits and into regular clothes. They were back and forth between the pool and Sandra's cottage in a constant procession—and not a long one at that, since the two were divided by less than a hundred feet.

Eventually new drink setups were fixed in the dinette of Sandra's cottage, and a couple of guys appeared from the main kitchen with all the things that make up a buffet supper for a

healthy, hungry crowd: baked ham, thin sliced corned beef, various cheeses, rolls, white and rye bread, pickles, olives, tossed green salad with your choice of dressings, deviled eggs, and a few fancy eatments of the type described as "comestibles"—the kind of stuff you can buy only in expensive places. And coffee and tea and milk and soft drinks and beer and rum and brandy and liqueurs and a couple of fancy desserts. It didn't sound like hamburgers and hot dogs to me; it didn't sound like a party that a police sergeant could even think about without going bankrupt. And the way Sandra took it for granted: all that highclass stuff in liberal quantities . . . that was what impressed a Joe like me. You gave a party, that was the way you did it. Eventually a check would be presented and you'd sign it. You'd give the waiters huge tips and you'd take care of the maitre d' who had supervised, though only to the extent that he wouldn't have to worry about the next payment on his Cadillac.

The Bartons told me again that they hadn't seen Clive during the merrymaking. They gave me a somewhat incomplete list of their guests, and the names of those who had joined the party out of sheer good fellowship. The Miramonte, it seemed, was just one big happy family. I got so many names that they ceased to mean anything. Sandra said, "I estimate that we had about forty people milling around."

"Cosy," I said.

"Not the way I like it, either, Sergeant. But folks around here have been kind to me, and a big party cancels a lot of obligations."

Well, getting back to the business in hand, it seemed that Margaret Graham had finished her swimming and gone to her own cottage to change at about seven-thirty. She had apparently come back to the party on schedule, and had appointed herself assistant hostess. About nine-thirty the guests started really eating and drinking, and fresh crockery and glasses were in demand. That was when Margaret Graham offered to lend some of hers. She had gone to her cottage, leaving the guests at Sandra's eating, drinking, and dancing. The music was being furnished by a phonograph, and I found out later that it must

have been pretty loud because the manager reported that several hotel guests had complained.

Then—zowie! Margaret Graham reappeared in a slightly hysterical state to announce that Clive Barton was lying dead in her cottage. There was a general rush for the scene of the tragedy, but Alan Rogers had stopped that. He advised folks to stay out of there, to leave things for the police. By rushing in, he explained, they couldn't do anything except louse things up. And then the next thing Sandra remembered was the arrival of the first patrol car containing two uniformed men from the West Los Angeles Division. They had gotten there around ten o'clock, and had taken over until the first detectives arrived. And that was all the Bartons knew. They said they couldn't remember who went where or when or whether anybody went anywhere during that hectic half-hour.

I leaned back in my chair, suffering acutely from a feeling of futility. I didn't seem to have made any progress at all. Then Mr. Barton came up with something.

"I think," he said, "that Sergeant O'Leary should be told about the jewels."

Sandra nodded. "Yes . . ." She went off into deep thought, too. "But Margaret should be the one to tell him." She turned to me. "Ask her," she suggested. "Ask Margaret."

"About what?"

"Something that happened several days ago. It involved a lot of jewels. I was there, of course, but she can explain it better than I can." She turned to her father. "I've thought about it a lot, Dad," she said, "and every time I think, I feel more confused."

That made two of us.

Up to now I had understood nothing. As of this moment, my understanding had been reduced 50 per cent.

7

EVERY SO OFTEN I get philosophical in a bush-league way. To me, my thoughts are profound, and I reckon if I'm pleased with myself occasionally, no harm is done.

Right now I was reflecting on detective work. I thought about a little hunk of snow getting dislodged near the crest of a high mountain. I thought about how it would start to slide, getting bigger and moving faster every second until finally—an avalanche.

I wasn't kidding myself. What had started as the fatal shooting of a prowler had become a full-scale snowslide, and I was at the bottom of the slide, underneath all the snow. The more I heard, the less I knew. I figured that if things kept on as they were going I'd eventually qualify as a full-fledged moron.

I joined Lieutenant Walsh and Lane. I told them about the Bartons' suggestion that I quiz Margaret Graham about some jewels. Marty said, "What the hell have jewels got to do with this?"

I said I didn't know. I said Sandra thought Miss Graham would enlighten us: that it was her idea.

"Whose idea?" growled Marty.

"Sandra's."

"Oh! Sandra! Since when did you and her get to be buddy-buddy?"

"Since the last half-hour." I tried to look professional. "She's something to look at."

"And you looked?"

"Well, naturally. Even a gelding like you would be interested, Marty."

He snorted derisively. "You young cops: all you think of is sex."

"Is that bad, Marty?"

He motioned me to follow him. Bert Lane and Don Gram fell into step. We approached Cottage 16.

Lane said, "The technical boys have finished their job. So has the deputy coroner."

"What did the coroner say?"

"Well, after a thorough examination he decided that the deceased was defunct. They just rolled him away in the meat wagon."

"You fellers latch onto anything, Bert?"

"Boy! you said it. We're up to our eyes in information. Everybody we've talked to has a story to tell. Some of the stories check, some don't. And if we're going to be here all night—as I suspect we are—I hope we'll find some good samaritan who will rustle us up a few gallons of hot coffee and a sandwich or two."

We found Margaret Graham sitting on a rustic bench halfway between her cottage and the swimming pool. There was a man on each side of her. One was Alan Rogers. The other was introduced as Jim Fletcher. He was a big lad around thirty years of age, and my instinctive reaction to him was favorable, which probably wouldn't have given him any thrill even if he had known it.

In answer to Marty's questions, Fletcher said he was a friend of Margaret Graham's. "And of Alan Rogers', too?" asked Marty.

Fletcher shook his head. "Alan is my deadliest enemy, Lieutenant. He's a snake in the grass. He has supplanted me in the affections of Miss Graham. He says it's legal. What do you think?"

Ordinarily, Marty wouldn't have thought well of a guy who indulged in light and airy persiflage at a time like this, but I think he saw what Jim Fletcher was trying to do: to keep things as light as possible and thus make it easier for Margaret Graham. She still looked as though she'd been wrung dry emotionally.

"Miss Barton," said Walsh suddenly, "was telling us something about some jewels, Miss Graham. She suggested that we ask you about them."

Margaret hesitated and looked inquiringly at Alan Rogers. He shrugged and said, "If she wants you to tell about them . . ."

Walsh looked at him. "You know what it's all about, Mr. Rogers?"

"I know only what I saw and what I was told." The lawyer was his usual careful, cautious self. He looked like the kind of guy who tended to make a major production out of any trivial thing. Marty said, with an overtone of sarcasm, "Your attorney says you can talk, Miss Graham."

She said, "It's an odd story, Lieutenant. It happened last Thursday night. . . . That's nine days ago. . . ."

She started slowly, and then picked up speed, but you could see that she was still watching every word, and that Rogers was helping her watch 'em.

She said that on that particular night she and Alan had gone to the movies with Sandra Barton, Lance Holloway, and Valerie Clark. By me, the last two names meant nothing, but since Marty didn't interrupt to ask questions I figured that he'd already pegged them or just simply didn't want to disturb Margaret's forward progress.

She said that the quintet went in her car, a Buick convertible, 1953 model, and that after the show Sandra suggested they return to her cottage for a nightcap. They rolled into the hotel grounds around eleven o'clock and Sandra led the way into her place. Margaret Graham said she didn't know whether or not the front door had been locked: sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn't. But being a hotel, there would usually be a dozen or so people who might have access to keys.

"As Sandra snapped on the light," she continued cautiously, "we saw a small, crudely wrapped package just inside the door. I remember Sandra saying 'What's this?' . . . you know, the kind of unimportant thing you'd say if you were surprised. She picked it up and took it over to the coffee table in front of the couch. She unwrapped it and . . . well, that's when we saw the jewels.

"It came as a shock to all of us, Lieutenant. There were a couple of dozen unset stones: diamonds, sapphires, emeralds—all sizes, all shapes. I don't know whether they were real or

imitation, but they looked real. Lance Holloway said they were, and he should know."

"Why should he?"

"He used to work for his uncle in New York in the jewelry importing business."

"Did he say how much they were worth?"

"He said something about thirty or forty thousand dollars. He said that wasn't an expert appraisal . . . he was guessing. Then Sandra showed us the note printed on the inside of the paper in which the gems were wrapped. It was an unusual sort of thing. Maybe I'd better show you."

"You have the note?"

"Yes. And the jewels, too."

"How come?"

"Sandra asked me to take care of them for her. I'll tell you later why she requested it."

"Where are they now?"

"In my cottage. In the rosewood desk."

Marty had a glint in his eye. "The one the throw rug was in front of . . . the rug on which Clive Barton's body was lying when you saw him?"

"Yes. . . . I think I'd better turn them over to you, Lieutenant: the jewels' and the note." She looked toward the cottage apprehensively. "Are they . . . did they . . . ?"

"They've gone, Miss Graham. Nobody there now except a couple of cops. The place has been pretty well straightened out."

I could see that it took courage for Margaret Graham to re-enter the cottage. For the first time I felt sorry for her, and I found myself wondering whether I'd been right in my original estimate. Maybe this frozen exterior of hers was part of her professional equipment; maybe she was explosive underneath, subject to the same fears and doubts and feelings as any other person.

Fletcher and Alan Rogers walked into the cottage with her. We four detectives followed. I saw Miss Graham give a quick look around and draw a deep breath of relief. Everything looked normal. You couldn't guess that a very brief time ago someone had been killed in that room.

Margaret started toward the bedroom. Marty asked her where she was going. "The stuff is in the right compartment of that rosewood desk," she explained. "I've got the key in the drawer of my dressing table."

Marty and I exchanged glances. He reached into his pocket and produced the key. "I've got it here, Miss Graham," he said. "We found it when we were looking things over about an hour ago."

He gave the key to her and she inserted it into the lock of the right door of the desk. It opened easily. From one of the vertical compartments she took a package and presented it to Marty. "There," she said. "And I'm glad to get it out of my hands."

Walsh unrolled the paper. We gasped. The stones were beautiful. They were so beautiful that they looked like imitations.

Marty spread out the note in which the jewels had been wrapped. All of us quit looking at the jewels. The note was something for the books.

You didn't have to look twice to know that it had been done laboriously with a kid's printing set: one of those inexpensive outfits containing the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, the ten numerals, and a few extra pieces like the &, the \$, the c, the period, and the question mark. We read the note over Marty's shoulder:

TAKE CARE OF THESE JEWELS UNTIL YOU HEAR FROM ME.
DO NOT NOTIFY THE POLICE OR ANYBODY ELSE. YOU MUST
BELEIVE ME THAT I WILL BE WATCHING AND IF YOU TELL
THE COPS IT WILL BE JUST TOO BAD FOR YOU. I WILL
NOTIFY YOU WHEN I WANT THEM BACK. BEWARE.

It was straight out of an old-fashioned thriller: crude and awkward.

Marty said, "Is the stuff all there, Miss Graham?"

"I believe so. I didn't make a list."

"And this is the way it was found on the floor of Miss Barton's cottage the night you returned from the movies?"

"As far as I know—yes."

"You have had them in your possession ever since that night?"

"Yes. That is, I haven't checked on them, but I'm sure they haven't been disturbed."

"And now, Miss Graham, I have to ask you this: what reason did Miss Barton give for asking you to keep them for her? Why—even if she took that warning seriously—didn't she put them in the hotel safe?"

Margaret Graham hesitated for a long moment. Then she said, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. You'll have to ask Sandra."

8

WE PARADED BACK TO SANDRA'S COTTAGE, all of us, including Margaret Graham, Alan Rogers, and Jim Fletcher. I performed the introductions and waited for Marty Walsh to react when he first saw Sandra. He didn't.

Bert Lane and Sergeant Gram whistled with their eyes. I ranged alongside Bert and said, "That Walsh: What does it take to get a rise out of him—atom bombs?"

Bert grinned. "He hasn't recovered from Bunny Gilson."

"Who?"

"Miss Gloria Gilson—familiarily known as Bunny: and my guess is that it wouldn't be terribly difficult to get familiar."

I said, "When do I get to meet this fireball?"

"Practically any minute. You've heard Lance Holloway mentioned. Bunny might be his girl friend. She's also the girl friend of a hard character called Tug Livingston. They all live here or play here. It's quite complicated."

As we pulled up chairs and made ourselves more or less comfortable, I glanced at the clock. Ten after one. In the A.M. We should have been off duty at midnight. Now it looked as though we'd be sticking around the Miramonte at least until after breakfast.

"Miss Barton," said Marty, "we've got the jewels and the note, but there's one thing Miss Graham wouldn't tell us. Why did you turn them over to her when you could just as easily have put them in the hotel safe? Did the note scare you?"

"Yes. But not in the way you think."

"What way do I think?"

"I mean I wasn't scared by the threat. It was . . ." She paused, looking around the room, seemed to get no help from anybody, and then took the plunge. "I was afraid that my brother had written that note, Lieutenant. I was afraid that he might have stolen the jewels."

"What makes you think Clive did it?"

"Nothing specific. He was always begging me for money. No matter how much I gave him, he needed more. If he had come into possession of those stones illegally, he'd naturally think of hiding them with me. That crude note done on a kid's printing set, the melodramatic threat . . . well, I think it *had* to be someone close to me. It's the way Clive would think and the sort of thing he'd do."

"Would he figure he could get them back from you any time he wanted them?"

"Could be."

"Did he make any attempt to get them back?"

"No-o . . . not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, two or three times I caught him probing into my place. He always gave some silly excuse like looking for fresh cigarettes or something like that."

"So he believed you still had them in your possession?"

"He did. Until . . ." She cut it off sharply.

"Until when?"

"Nothing. I didn't mean to say that. Forget it."

But Marty wasn't forgetting it. I saw that bulldog look in his eyes, and Mr. Barton saw it, too, because he projected himself into the conversation. He said, "You may as well get the whole truth, Lieutenant: Clive knew where the jewels were."

"How did he find out?"

"I told him."

"When?"

"This morning."

"Your daughter had told you?"

"Yes. When it first happened. I wanted to find out definitely whether or not Clive was involved. It also seemed important for me to learn if he were *not* involved."

"Why?"

"Because if Clive wasn't in on it, then someone else was. And while Clive wouldn't represent danger to Sandra . . . another person might. I was afraid for both my children."

"So-o-o . . . ?"

"Sandra told me that Clive had been searching her cottage yesterday. I questioned him about it this morning, and he gave some flimsy excuse. I said, 'Well, she hasn't got what you're looking for, Son,' and he said he didn't know what I meant. Then he asked me where *they* were. He used the word 'they'—not 'it.' That was when I realized that he knew. I told him—I realize now that I was foolish, but a father often is, especially when he's worried—I told him that 'they' had been turned over to Miss Graham."

Marty nodded. Everything fitted. Presuming that Clive had stolen the jewels in the first place, or had been involved in the theft, he could have left the gems with his sister during the period when he figured the heat was on. Then, faced with need for fresh capital, he started frisking her cottage with no results. Finally, that very morning, Ellis Barton had told him that the stuff was in Margaret Graham's possession. Miss Graham was going to be at Sandra's party. So he could have walked in, found the key to the desk, and have been in the act of raiding it when Miss Graham surprised him. Marty turned to Margaret Graham.

"This setup would make it simple for you, Miss Graham. If someone you didn't know, someone you couldn't identify in the dark, was in the act of burglarizing your place, whatever you did would seem to be justified."

Alan Rogers broke in. He said, "Why not lay off that, Lieutenant? Margaret has already told you that that isn't what happened. She found the body lying on the throw rug in front of the rosewood desk."

"That's her story, huh?" Marty's voice was flat and hard. "Why are you so interested in having her stick to it?"

"Because it's the truth."

"How do you know it's the truth? All you know is that it's the story she told you."

"I believe her."

Bert Lane interrupted. Once again he had assumed the role of uncouth policeman . . . the role which had gotten such a rise out of Margaret Graham in the first place. "You mean, Mr. Rogers, that you ain't got no more sense than to believe what anybody tells you?"

"I believe anything Margaret tells me."

"You seem awful interested in seeing that she doesn't change that story. Why?"

Margaret said angrily, "Because he knows it's true."

"Just like everything else you told us is true?"

"Yes."

"Then how do you explain that there wasn't no throw rug in front of the desk. Clive Barton wasn't lying there: he was on your bed. Your gun wasn't in the sitting room. It was in the bedroom."

Sandra said, "What does that mean, Lieutenant?"

"It means," stated Lane with deliberate harshness, "that something stinks on ice. Miss Graham's cottage wasn't like she described it. Either she isn't telling the truth or else someone else went in there between the time she seen the body and the time the patrol car got here, and proceeded to bitch things up."

Sandra looked incredulous and frightened. She said, "But that doesn't make sense. Who would . . ."

"Look, Miss Barton, you been around. Supposing Mr. Rogers and Miss Graham was good friends. Suppose Clive Barton was lying on Miss Graham's bed, nice and relaxed. Well, if that was the case, maybe Miss Graham would just say it happened in the sitting room. Get me?"

"Lieutenant," exploded Alan Rogers, "you've got a mind like a sewer."

"That's what all my friends tell me," retorted Lane imper-
turbably.

Sandra kept saying, "I don't understand it. . . . I don't understand it. . . ."

"No, ma'am, none of us do. Whoever done whatever they done made a good job of it. Maybe it was Miss Graham telling it wrong in the first place. Maybe it was someone else deliberately lousing up the investigation." He smiled intimately at Sandra as though to let her understand that his masquerade was solely for the benefit of Margaret Graham and Alan Rogers. "And of course, Miss Barton, it could be that if your brother had done something wrong, and if he had a partner . . . well, that person might have stepped into the picture unbeknownst to any of us." His smile became broader, more friendly. "There ain't nothing for you to be scared of no more, Miss Barton: you or your father, either. The worst has happened. We've got the jewels. We've got most everything we need except the right answer."

He favored Margaret Graham with a prolonged scrutiny, then turned to Marty and me.

"This Tug Livingston . . . he could be worth talking to, don't you think?"

Marty nodded, and then spoke to Sandra. "Was your brother friendly with Livingston, Miss Barton?"

"They knew each other. I never saw much of Tug. I didn't like him."

"Why?" I asked.

"You'll find out," said Bert Lane. He led the way toward the door. "Me and you, Danny—and Marty, of course—we might just have ourselves a little talk with the gent."

9

WE FOUND TUG BY THE SWIMMING POOL, but I didn't see him clearly. I was blinded by the redhead whom Marty introduced as Bunny Gilson. He didn't say "Miss." Somehow, you got the impression that Bunny wasn't the formal type.

The party at Sandra's house was long since over. The guests had changed from their swimming togs. But not Bunny. One glance and I understood why.

She had on a terry-cloth beach robe but it was open in front, and what was underneath . . . well, I suppose it would technically be called a bathing suit, but it might just as well not have been there.

I had always liked the sound of the word "voluptuous," but never before had I known its ultimate meaning. This girl had it here, there, and everywhere . . . and she didn't care who knew it. Under the amused stares of Marty Walsh and Bert Lane, I focused my attention on her points of interest, and then I said weakly, "They call you Bunny?"

"They sho do, honey. Like a bunny rabbit. Though I haven't been laid since Easter."

A lecherous chuckle came from one of the cops at my shoulder. The voice said, "See what I mean, Danny?"

Bunny touched my arm, causing me to quiver. She said, "I think you're cute, Danny."

Bert Lane said, "You ain't being true to me, Bunny. Just a little while ago it was Marty and I who were cute."

"You're all cute." Bunny stepped away—about two inches away—and laughed delightedly. "You're the first real live policemen I ever met. I think we're going to get along just fine."

Tug Livingston spoke, his voice slicing through the sudden silence. He said, "Break it up, Bunny. If you got to peddle your tail, don't do it with cops."

The voice, the manner, the crudity, all hit me wrong. I inspected Mr. Livingston for the first time.

He wasn't so tall, but he was big: big all the way through. Maybe five-eight in height, but he wouldn't tip the scales at less than 190, and it looked like solid muscle. Later I discovered that he was fifty-one years old, but my guess would have been about forty.

He looked tough, talked tough, and I knew instinctively he was tough. He was flashily dressed in Hawaiian shirt, checkered sports coat, decply pleated slacks. Argyll socks, and expensive moccasins. He looked like a man who would

need a shave five minutes after shaving. I heard Marty's dry voice:

"Sergeant O'Leary," he said, "permit me to introduce Mr. Marvin Livingston. Alias 'Tug.'"

Livingston said, "Is that alias business supposed to be a smart crack, Walsh?"

Bunny swayed provocatively. She said to me, "What are you doing every night for the next month, Danny?"

I felt embarrassed. A man enjoys a gal making a play for him, but not necessarily in front of an audience. I said, "That depends on you, Bunny."

"Well, hush my mouth. It looks like maybe we're going to be real good friends."

Tug Livingston hoisted himself out of his deck chair. He wrapped powerful fingers around Bunny Gilson's arm and jerked her away from me. He said, "What you mean, making a play for a louse like him?"

I was doing a burn: the real angry kind that a cop feels for a professional hoodlum. I said, "Keep your shirt on, Marvin."

"And lay off that Marvin stuff. I'm called Tug. Or Mr. Livingston."

"Thanks, Marvin. I'll remember that."

"And remember another thing to go along with it. Bunny is my girl and I'm not sharing her with any flatfoot."

She said, "I am not your girl, Tug. I got lots of friends, and if—"

His face was ugly. "Shut up, you. One more word and I'll slap your ears down."

She said, "Danny wouldn't let you."

"That son of a bitch?" Tug surveyed me from head to foot. "Why, if he didn't have a tin badge and a popgun, I'd . . ."

"You'd do *what*, Marvin?"

"I'd beat the everlasting hell out of you."

He was riding me, straight and hard. I knew it without understanding why. Nor did I know why Marty was letting it build. Anyway, if Tug Livingston had wanted to make me mad, he had succeeded. He said, "I hate cops."

Marty Walsh said, with unctuous politeness, "There's a

reason for that, Danny. A few minutes ago we had one of the boys run Mr. Livingston. He's got an FBI number. It seems that Mr. Livingston has done time as the guest of the State of New York and has also been arrested on suspicion of a number of felonies."

Tug said, "I told you myself I was an ex-con. But them other charges never stood up. I beat all the raps. And now when a crummy bastard like this O'Leary starts making a play for my dame . . ."

"Listen, Marvin," I said. "That's twice you've laid it on too thick. Maybe I am a son of a bitch. Maybe I am a bastard. But nobody like you is going to tell me so." I spoke to Marty. "What did this character do time for?"

"Narcotics."

"User?"

"He was shoving the stuff."

I said, "A guy that would peddle narcotics is the lowest thing nature ever created."

I was looking at Marty while I was talking. That was a mistake.

Tug Livingston's blow caught me on the left side of my jaw, and it carried plenty of heft. I was killing mad. I waded in, but Marty grabbed me. "That's all for now," he snapped. "But we can hold Mr. Livingston if we want: assaulting an officer in the discharge of his duty."

"Let me take him off behind that hedge yonder, Marty. Just for one minute, please."

Tug Livingston didn't scare. He said, "Yeh, do that little thing, Marty."

Walsh reverted suddenly to the ice-cold policeman. He said, "There'll be no fighting here, Tug. Maybe some time you'll get your chance at Sergeant O'Leary. But I'm telling you now, you won't find it awful healthy."

"I'll take my chances."

"You won't take a god-damned thing. You'll do what we tell you, when we tell you. And you'll keep that lip buttoned except to answer questions."

"Says who?"

"You heard me." I hadn't pegged Marty's angle, but whatever it was it didn't make my distaste for Mr. Tug Livingston any less acute. Marty said, "How long you been in California, Tug?"

"What's it to you?"

"I asked you a question. I intend to get an answer. You can let me do my questioning the easy way or you can compel me to do it the hard way. You call it."

Livingston said surlily, "I been here about a year."

"Staying at the Miramonte?"

"In this crappy joint? Hell, No! I got an apartment downtown, near Wilshire."

"You hang around here a lot, don't you?"

"What if I do?"

"Why?"

"Maybe I like to swim. Maybe I just come to visit Bunny."

"You know what happened here tonight?"

"Sure. Everybody knows."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"Don't try to play it smart, Copper. It doesn't fit you."

"Where were you?"

"Here and there. Around and about."

"Were you acquainted with Clive Barton?"

"Maybe."

"Known him long?"

"Long enough."

"Long enough to kill him?"

Tug gave vent to a burst of raucous laughter. "Jesus! of all the hick detectives, you're the worst. What am I supposed to do? Confess?"

"That might be fun. But I'm not expecting it."

"I wouldn't help you even if I could."

"You've helped already. On behalf of myself and my colleagues, we thank you. Aside from Miss Gilson . . . what friends have you got around this hotel?"

"I got no friends nowhere."

"Marvin," I interrupted, "is a lone wolf. Just like in the movies."

I got a quick rise out of him. He spat an epithet at me, but I was prepared, and managed to take it in stride.

"Even in California," said Tug, "it ain't no crime to chase nooky. What else you want to know?"

"Well . . . you seem to be an observant sort of a person. Maybe you noticed some things we've overlooked. Maybe you could come up with a suggestion or two."

Tug Livingston looked surprised. He was a cop-hater, a cop-fighter, but apparently he'd never encountered anyone like Marty Walsh. He didn't know how to figure the guy. Marty was playing it dumb, but not too dumb; smart, but not too smart.

Tug said suddenly, "You want to talk to somebody, fella, you might give a little attention to Lance Holloway."

"Holloway?" Marty looked as though he'd never heard the name. "Where does he figure?"

"I didn't say he did. But he's around here a lot."

"Doing what?"

"He's at stud."

"And who is the happy recipient of his attentions?"

"Try Mrs. Valerie Clark. She lives in Cottage 9. Crawling with dough. Has her own personal maid and chauffeur. She shacks up with Lance Holloway."

"How old is she?"

"Hell, I don't know. . . ."

Bunny Gilson broke in eagerly. Obviously she felt that she had been receiving too little attention.

"Valerie Clark," stated Bunny, "is a nice little old lady."

"Old?"

"She says she's thirty-two, but I know she'll never see forty again. She likes Lance because he's young and virile."

"How virile?" I asked.

"Oh, *you*!" She turned her searchlight on me. "How would I know, Danny? I'm not promiscuous with men I don't like."

Bert Lane, who had been silent for a long time, horned into the conversation. He said, "The record of this investigation, Marty, is going to read like the Kinsey Report. Sooner or later

we'll find somebody who isn't getting any of you-know-what and that'll be our Number One suspect by process of elimination. Funny, isn't it, how sunshine and a swimming pool will arouse the beast in men?"

"And women, too." That was Bunny Gilson again. "Don't forget me."

I said, "Were you at Miss Barton's party, Bunny?"

"Oh, sure. Of course, she didn't invite me, but I went anyway. I love parties. How about you and me having one some time soon, Danny?"

I bowed too elaborately and told her I was at her service. That seemed to infuriate Tug Livingston all over again. No question about it, Bunny meant something to him.

I said, "Maybe I'll take a look around, Marty." I bowed mockingly toward Tug. "With your permission, Marvin."

He called me a nasty name. Bunny wrapped her arm around mine. "Don't get mad again, Danny," she begged. "You're cuter when you're not."

10

VIRGIL FORSYTHE, WHO WAS FORTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD, pink, pudgy, and partly bald, approached us mincingly, blinked coquettishly, and told us he was assistant manager of the Miramonte. He didn't say what else he was, but we could guess. He said he appreciated the arduous labors upon which we were engaged (that's the way he expressed it) and inquired whether we would like some ham and eggs, toast and coffee. We all said Yes with such enthusiasm that Virgil fluttered with excitement as he led the way into a private dining room and gave falsetto instructions to a waiter who was working overtime. We shooed him out of the room, lighted cigarettes, relaxed, and tried to assemble our facts into some sort of pattern.

Uniformed officers were on duty at Margaret Graham's cot-

tage and other strategic points. This break in the investigation wasn't going to use up much time, and it was certain to pay off.

Marty and I were stuck with the deal. It looked as though Bert Lane and Don Gram intended to ride it out with us, but that was because they chose to—because they were good policemen—not because they had to. With Marty and me, things were different.

Under ordinary conditions, being a detective in Los Angeles is a pretty nice setup. You work an eight-hour shift and you get eight days off every month. Comes the end of your shift, you go home or wherever else you feel like going until it's time to punch the clock the next day.

But every once in a while—especially if you're attached to one of the specialized divisions like Homicide—you're slapped in the face with something that sizzles, something you can't let go of until you've done all the basic spadework.

Take this shuffle, for instance. There was no faintest doubt that Clive Barton had been murdered. Margaret Graham could have made it easy for us by simply saying she had shot an unrecognized intruder, but that wasn't how she was playing it. And if we could accept all, or any, of her story—we were up against something hot.

We were in a situation which involved a hotel: you couldn't bar guests from coming and going; you wanted to talk to them before they had time to consider too carefully what they were going to tell; you had to decide who were suspects and who were not. You had to keep pounding, pounding, pounding until you couldn't pound any more. Time didn't matter. You worked until you got something, or until exhaustion caught up with you. Getting fresh dicks to relieve you wouldn't do any good, not in the preliminary stages. You had to see for yourself, do your own talking, reach your own conclusions. Beyond the first phase, the investigation could be done in relays, but not now.

Waiting for the chow, we indulged in a little palavering. I asked Marty why he had needled Tug Livingston into hanging one on my jaw. Walsh grinned. "It worked, didn't it, Danny?"

He was feeling so good after slugging a cop that he told us a lot more than he'd have said under any other circumstances."

"Yeh. But why not your jaw, Marty?"

"I'm allergic to being punched. Besides, he didn't like you anyway. Why not let the lad enjoy himself?"

"Nuts. The man packs a wallop. I wish . . ."

"Wouldn't you settle for Bunny Gilson? I could arrange that."

Lane and Gram leered at me. "We find 'em," said Bert, "and you wrestle 'em. One punch is a small price to pay for a dame like Miss Gilson."

"You can have her."

"So how does that make me different from all the other men she's ever met? No, Danny . . . I leave that stuff alone. And she didn't go for me, anyway. As for you, you're in like Flynn."

The waiter returned followed by a bellhop and Mr. Virgil Forsythe. Mr. Forsythe waved his hand prettily and chattered in a flutelike voice. What we got still came out ham and eggs. And the coffee, of course, gallons of it. And toast and marmalade. Mr. Forsythe begged us to tell him if anything wasn't to our liking. He indicated that he thought we were wonderful. He thought it must be terribly, devastatingly fascinating to be in a profession such as ours. And finally he swayed through the door. Marty said, "He'd make a good wife for some young man."

We attacked the breakfast. It was sure-nuff good. It gave us new pep and enthusiasm. It made us feel downright grateful to Virgil. With our insides stoked, we felt that we could keep going indefinitely.

We pooled our information. It was immediately apparent that we had too much stuff to go on, rather than too little. There was no one person you could latch onto at the expense of the others.

"If they'd pass laws eliminating sex and money," observed Bert Lane, "detective work would be a pushover."

Marty said, "It's an idea. Write your congressman. But don't tell him you're too old anyway."

"Old? Me? Hell, Marty, did I tell you about that gorgeous blonde I went out with when . . ."

"Just before the First World War, wasn't it?"

"No. After. I remember I was driving an Apperson Jack-rabbit. It was one of these late models: self-starter, demountable rims, tires guaranteed for 5,000 miles. . . . What I want to know is this, Marty: how much of a record has Tug Livingston got?"

That was a cop for you: kidding along but thinking about the job he was doing. Marty said, "I told you we ran his FBI number. He did time once. There were a lot of other arrests. Suspicion. Unproved, dropped, or acquitted. Murder, robbery, bookmaking. Mainly narcotics."

"How mainly?"

"They're checking on that downtown. Bill Muncrief is on it personally. I gather that our friend Mr. Livingston may be a big-time operator."

"He lives in Wilshire Division," I said. "What's he doing hanging around here so much?"

"Have you forgotten Bunny already?"

"Be yourself, Marty. A guy like Tug wants a little of what Bunny's got: he sends for her. But that ain't how it's been working. He comes out here a lot, he hangs around, he knows people. That ain't because he's got a fraternal disposition."

Marty said to Bert, "Our young friend Danny is getting smart. Maybe some day he'll be a detective." He swallowed the last of his ham and eggs, poured a third cup of coffee, and started in on the toast and marmalade. "You're right, of course, Danny," he said calmly. "I figure that if Tug Livingston made a lot of dough from narcotics, he's still in it. I wouldn't figure he'd be the kind of guy you'd find the stuff on . . . but maybe if you dug deep enough into some important deals you'd see traces of Tug. He may have contacts in and around the Miramonte."

"Like who?"

"Like anybody. That's a big money racket. It ain't easy getting to the guys you want: the brains. On an average, all you turn up is the users and the small-time peddlers. And you can

write this down in your little book: When you're dealing with men in the dope racket, you're dealing with danger. They're always on the foul side of the line . . . with the State and with the U.S. They got no heart and no conscience. There isn't a filthier crime in the world."

"Do you think Livingston and dope could be tied in with what happened tonight?"

"I don't think anything. But I'm keeping my mind open. We never had the chance to meet our corpse socially, but my guess is that Clive Barton would be a perfect patsy for big-time operators. You can tell from what his father and sister said—from the way they tried to tell the truth and yet still covered for him—that he was a graduate son of a bitch."

"We know he lived high. We know he needed money. . . ."

"And he may have known too much. A dope racketeer doesn't like smart guys working for him. They can be cracked too easy."

"So—just following the trail, Marty—it could be that Tug Livingston saw Clive go into Margaret Graham's cottage. He knew the party was winging at Miss Barton's place. He could have picked that chance to knock the kid over."

"Then go back later and louse up the place?" That was me asking the question—not because I expected an answer but just to help clarify my own thoughts. "It doesn't figure."

"Miss Graham may not have been telling the truth about how she found things. If the guy was on her bed . . ."

"I'm not buying that, either. The estimable Miss Graham looks like she wouldn't give it away, and God knows—from what I've heard of her success in business—she wouldn't have to sell it."

"You don't react to Margaret, do you, Danny?"

"Not that way, certainly. I don't doubt that she's an estimable and virtuous young lady, but I wouldn't peg her as the sexy type."

"Maybe Alan Rogers could tell you different. Or this Jim Fletcher."

Bert Lane said, "Nice guy, that Fletcher. As much as I don't like Rogers, I go for him."

I said, "How about those jewels, Marty?"

"That's anybody's guess. Right now, it adds up to our young friend Clive. Sandra and Mr. Barton think so, too."

"What happens to the jewels now?"

"I don't know the specific time limit. But ordinarily we'd hold them for the statutory period. Then, if no one turned up to identify or claim them, I suppose they'd be turned back to Miss Barton as her property. Finders keepers, you know."

"But she didn't find them. They were left in her house by someone who seemed scared. My guess is that they were stolen."

"We got downtown working on that, too," answered Marty. "Checking burglaries and robberies locally and nationally. If they were grabbed in a single deal, there'll be a report on them somewhere. Of course if there were a lot of single thefts . . . but I don't think there were. That packet of stuff looks like it would have been corralled in one deal. If it was, whoever lost it—dealer or individual—would be certain to report it. If they did, we'll come up with the record. There must be forty grand worth of stones there."

I said, "This Lance Holloway we've been hearing about: Didn't someone say he was with the Graham party the night the jewels were discovered inside her door? And hadn't he been in the jewelry business?"

"That's the way I got it."

"Could it be interesting to find out why he retired from the jewelry business? Could it be that he had latched onto a bunch of unset stones?"

"Sure, Danny, sure. That's why we've got to have a chat with Mr. Holloway. Also with his rich gal friend, this Mrs. Valerie Clark. Maybe she could identify the jewels."

"What's the program from now on? Tonight?"

"Well, I'll say that we got to talk to about seven thousand more people in order to get seven thousand times as confused as we are now. We'll have to shake down the apartment where Clive Barton lived with his father. And there will be other things that—"

The door burst open and Virgil Forsythe flounced in. He told

us that Mr. Wayne Medwick wanted to talk to us. We asked who the hell was Wayne Medwick, and Virgil looked shocked. He said that Mr. Medwick was a wealthy and important gentleman—a guest of the Miramonte. He said that he was sure that what Mr. Medwick wanted to discuss with us was important.

It was.

11

THE WAITER TOOK AWAY THE BREAKFAST DISHES and brought in Wayne Medwick. He was forty-three years of age and looked younger. He was slightly under six feet in height, weighed in the neighborhood of 170, and had a firm, well-conditioned body. His hair was dark brown, neatly trimmed; his clothes were of the conservative business type with not a touch of Southern California affectation. He introduced himself, apologized for intruding, and took a seat at the table with us. He said, without preamble, "I've heard a lot about what happened tonight, Lieutenant. I have some information which probably means nothing, but might be important."

His voice was quiet. He expressed himself clearly, without working at it. After all the screwballs we had encountered, he seemed to be distressingly normal.

Marty said, "Yes, sir . . . ?" and waited.

"Just a word about myself," said Medwick. "I am a native New Yorker. I'm visiting in California and have been a guest at this hotel for about three months. I would describe myself as a retired businessman. Actually, I buy and sell stocks through a half-dozen brokerage firms. I have no family. One of the few persons I really like seems to be involved in this thing tonight: Miss Margaret Graham."

"Is she a very close friend, Mr. Medwick?"

He smiled. "Not in the way you mean. I met her shortly after moving into the Miramonte. At the same time I met her two

young men: Alan Rogers and Jim Fletcher. We found that we had interests in common."

"What sort of interests?"

"Things that wouldn't be important except to a stranger with too much time on his hands. I still play a better-than-average game of tennis, and I've played a lot of doubles with Margaret, Alan, and Jim. Several times I've been their fourth at bridge. I have enjoyed meals and conversational evenings with each of them separately and all of them together."

"Were you at Sandra Barton's party tonight?"

"No. I've met Miss Barton, of course. Occasionally she and her father would come over to the tennis courts to watch us play. Two or three times she has gone swimming with us, and then invited us into her cottage for drinks. But my contact with her was merely that of casual acquaintance: we were both friends of Miss Graham. I suppose she would have invited me to her party if she had thought about it. But she didn't."

"Where were you during the evening?"

"I ate dinner alone in the hotel dining room. Before and after that, I was sitting by the swimming pool alone."

"Doing what?"

"The thing I'm best at: nothing. Watching other people. Enjoying their pleasures vicariously."

"From where you were sitting by the pool—could you see the cottages of Miss Graham and Miss Barton?"

"Oh, yes."

"And . . . ?"

Wayne Medwick explained that he didn't want to create a false impression, that what he had observed had seemed unimportant when it happened, and would have continued to seem that way except for what had developed since. Marty asked him to continue, and he did.

He said, "Between eight-thirty and nine-thirty—those being approximate times, of course—I saw two men enter Miss Graham's cottage."

"Together?"

"No. Separately."

"Where did they come from?"

"From the party, I thought. But remember, this is all hindsight. When I saw them, their actions meant nothing to me."

"Were either or both of them furtive?"

"I couldn't see clearly enough to answer that, Lieutenant. They each went in. I saw one of them come out."

"The other one stayed in?"

"I wouldn't say that. All I can say is that I didn't see him come out. He could have used the door at the front of the cottage which I couldn't see from where I was sitting—or he might have come out when I was looking at something else."

"Did you recognize either man?"

"No."

"And then . . . ?"

"Approximately at nine-thirty I saw Margaret Graham go into her own cottage."

"You recognized her—even from that distance?"

"Yes."

"What happened then?"

"I saw the light go on—"

"Had either of the men who visited the cottage previously turned on the light?"

"I didn't notice any light until Margaret turned it on. Then she ran out of her cottage toward Miss Barton's place."

"Did you hear a shot?"

"No. Not then or at any other time."

"Did you hear an automobile backfire, Mr. Medwick?"

He shook his head. "That's the way it's usually described, isn't it? Well, I'm afraid I didn't hear anything like that."

"Now then: Miss Graham rushed to Miss Barton's cottage. What did she do?"

"Apparently she called Alan Rogers. I saw him join her outside. She seemed excited, and I got the idea he was trying to quiet her. They walked in this direction and stopped right behind some hibiscus bushes not ten feet from where I was sitting."

"Could Mr. Rogers have been one of the two men who previously entered Miss Graham's cottage?"

"I can't answer that. I simply don't know."

"You say Miss Graham and Mr. Rogers walked over to some bushes near you. Could you hear what they were saying?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Margaret was telling him that there was a dead man in her cottage—"

"She used the word 'dead' as though she were sure?"

"Yes. She seemed on the edge of hysteria. Alan kept telling her to get a grip on herself. She told him the dead man was Clive Barton and asked what she should do. Alan told her to do nothing. He said they'd notify the police immediately, but meanwhile he thought it would be a good idea for nobody to enter the cottage. She agreed. Then she started crying. That was when I let them know I had heard."

"What was their reaction?"

"That didn't seem to bother either of them. Rogers asked whether I had heard a shot and I said No." I saw Marty Walsh and Bert Lane exchange quick glances. "Then," Medwick continued, "Alan Rogers said something about preparing Mr. and Miss Barton for the shock and they walked to Miss Barton's cottage together."

"You stayed where you were?"

"Yes. That's why I'm talking to you now. Ordinarily I'd prefer not to be involved in any way. But something happened between the time when Margaret and Alan left me alone and the time when the first police car arrived. A man entered Margaret's cottage."

"Who?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Didn't that strike you as peculiar after you'd just heard them agree that no one was to enter the cottage until the police arrived?"

"In a way, yes. Then I figured they might have changed their minds. Actually, I didn't pay too much attention until the man came out."

"What interested you then?"

"This man was carrying something under his arm. It was an odd shape . . . like a rug that had been rolled up."

Wham! That one came fast. The air in our conference room suddenly became electric. Marty's voice continued quiet and steady.

"What did this man do?"

"He disappeared around the corner of the cottage."

"In the direction of the automobile parking lot?"

"Yes."

"Did you recognize him?"

"No."

"But you had recognized Miss Graham."

"Yes. For two reasons: First, I knew her. Second, I saw her when she left Miss Barton's cottage and started for her own. I didn't see where this third man came from. He didn't turn on any light."

"Did he look like Alan Rogers?"

"I won't answer that. He looked like anybody or nobody."

"Why didn't you follow him?"

"I wasn't having any part of it. I know that sounds odd to you. Investigating is your profession, but it's not mine. It was my first close contact with violent death. Perhaps, as a good citizen, I should have followed. The fact remains that I didn't."

Marty said, "I don't blame you, Mr. Medwick. You've helped a lot as it is. Now tell me one more thing: how long had you been sitting by the pool before the first of the original two men entered Miss Graham's cottage?"

"Not long. Just a few minutes. I ate my dinner later than usual. I was away from the pool for probably an hour."

"And you got back there about nine o'clock?"

"That's correct."

Marty and Lane retired to a corner where they held a brief conference. They came back to the table, thanked Mr. Medwick for his help, and asked whether he would be willing to co-operate further.

Medwick hesitated briefly, then nodded. "I'll do my best," he promised, "provided you don't ask me to do any guessing. I'm willing to tell you what I know, but not what I think."

12

THEY HANDLED WAYNE MEDWICK with kid gloves. He was the best bet we'd uncovered yet, and we didn't want to scare him off.

His reluctance to go too far out on any limb was understandable—even to be commended. On a homicide investigation you're usually snowed under with conjecture, prejudice, and unsound conclusions. Medwick seemed like a conservative guy: willing to help the police, intent on avoiding the spotlight, determined to be fair.

Marty questioned him about the personalities of the persons who seemed to be most involved. He started with Margaret Graham.

Wayne Medwick liked and admired her. He said that he had enjoyed an occasional tête-à-tête dinner with her at the hotel, and had found her excellent company in the swimming pool, on the tennis court, and over the bridge table. He said, "She is attractive and young—and she has two devoted and eligible admirers."

"Alan Rogers and Jim Fletcher?"

"Yes. They are friends of hers and friendly with each other."

He told us that Alan Rogers was thirty-one years of age, a lawyer with an excellent reputation and high ethical standards—he explained that he'd looked that up in case he ever needed legal advice—that Rogers occupied an apartment in Beverly Hills, drove a 1951 Chevrolet, had been an ensign in the naval reserve at the outbreak of World War II, had seen plenty of action in the South Pacific, and had been separated from the service as a lieutenant commander.

Jim Fletcher, he said, had been a lieutenant of infantry serving in the ETO. He was in the real-estate and insurance business

and a thoroughly likable person. Medwick guessed Fletcher's age to be about the same as Rogers'.

"They're both chasing Miss Graham?"

"If that's what you want to call it, Lieutenant."

"Which one is her favorite?"

"Alan Rogers, I believe."

"Which of the men do you prefer?"

"I like Jim Fletcher better, but how Margaret feels about him, I wouldn't know."

"Try to answer this one, Mr. Medwick. You're evidently a good judge of people. . . ." Marty was buttering him up. "Would you say that between Margaret Graham and either or both of these young men there was anything more than . . . well, that there could be a sexual relationship?"

Medwick flushed angrily. "Aren't you reaching pretty far, Lieutenant?"

"Definitely. But it could be damned important. I don't have to waste my breath and your time explaining that jealousy is one of our most popular murder motives."

"You're sure this was murder?"

"Either that—or Miss Graham lied. And if she lied, that would make things look just as bad."

"How?"

"A person doesn't make up a complicated story when a simple truth would serve as well. Miss Graham's account of finding the body doesn't check with what the police found. She could be covering for herself or someone else. And don't ask us why, because we don't know. We're groping."

Wayne Medwick said that he didn't believe there was any sex affair involving Margaret Graham and either of her two suitors. He said he believed Margaret wasn't the sort of woman who would indulge in that sort of thing."

Marty said, "How about the girl they call Bunny Gilson?"

Medwick stated with dry humor that if Marty had talked to Bunny he must already know the answer to that one. We looked at one another and smiled. No matter what else Bunny might be, she wasn't hard to figure from the physical angle.

"Could she have been beating Margaret's time with either Fletcher or Rogers?"

Medwick said he didn't think either of the young men would be interested in Bunny. He said they were both men of taste and discernment, which seemed to let Bunny out of their haylofts.

"How about Tug Livingston?"

Medwick tried to be fair, but you couldn't miss his dislike of Tug. He described him as cheap, loud, uncouth, vulgar, and tough.

"Would you say dangerous, too?"

"He impresses me that way. I've avoided him as much as possible. I can be amused by Bunny Gilson. A man like Tug Livingston disgusts me."

"Any contact between him and Margaret Graham?"

"I've seen them talking near the pool—but just as one hotel guest would respond to the greetings of another."

"You saw three men enter Miss Graham's cottage tonight. Two before the killing and one afterward. We'll presume that one of the original two was Clive Barton. Could either of the others have been Tug Livingston?"

"I've told you that I can't answer that question. If someone has to be involved in this thing, I'd prefer it to be Livingston. I don't like him. Nobody around here likes him. But I certainly cannot identify him as one of the three men who entered Miss Graham's cottage."

"How well acquainted are you with Sandra Barton and her father?"

"Slightly. No more. I've met both of them several times."

"Why weren't you invited to Miss Barton's party?"

"There was no reason why I should be. I'm just a guest of the hotel."

"But you were very friendly with Miss Graham and her two boy friends: you played tennis and bridge with them. Sandra knew about that, didn't she?"

"Naturally. That's how I met her. But this was Miss Barton's party, not Margaret's."

Marty told what he had heard about Lance Holloway and Mrs. Valerie Clark and asked how the story checked with what

Wayne Medwick had observed. Medwick said, "You're making me act the role of a gossip, Lieutenant. It doesn't fit."

"I know. But you've seen these folks. You enjoy studying them. . . ."

He finally got Medwick talking. What he told us about Holloway checked with our previous information. The guy was around twenty-eight. He was apparently a genial and chronic lush. Medwick said that in his mellower moments, Holloway joked about his troubles. He had said that he had been employed by an uncle who was an importer of precious stones.

"Unset gems?"

"That's the impression he gave me. He said he was fired by his uncle for drinking and general unreliability."

"Do you know Valerie Clark?"

Medwick said Yes, he did. He said everybody at the Miramonte knew her, laughed at her, and liked her. He said she apparently had lots of money, a delusion of youth, and a liking for young men.

"Was Holloway having an affair with her?"

Medwick said that he had never been invited to witness what went on between them but that the impression was that intimacy existed.

"Does Mrs. Clark wear lots of jewelry?"

Medwick said she was usually dripping with it, that she wore any- and everything which was flashy and expensive. He had seen her in a half-dozen fur coats which must have cost from five thousand to fifteen thousand each. Asked whether he thought she had so much jewelry that a batch of it could have been stolen without her missing it, he said he didn't know: it would be pure guesswork. I knew what Marty was driving at: that packet of unset gems could originally have been the property of Mrs. Valerie Clark. She might not have missed them, or she might have known they were gone and have kept quiet if she thought Lance Holloway could have been involved.

Bert Lane took over the questioning. He asked if Medwick had seen any contact between Mrs. Clark and Clive Barton, the young man who was now undergoing a slight autopsy.

"They knew each other, yes. How well, I wouldn't know."

"Were Clive Barton and Lance Holloway friendly?"

"Same answer."

"Would Holloway have been jealous of young Barton if Clive had been horning in on Mrs. Clark?"

Medwick surprised me by answering that one. He said, "I don't think Holloway would actually have been jealous of Mrs. Clark. If he was her gigolo, he could have resented anyone who threatened his position as beneficiary of her largess, but that would be all."

We had reached a dead end. We knew more than when the conversation started, but we weren't able to evaluate the importance of our newly acquired facts. Bert Lane said tiredly, "Is there anyone else around the hotel who might be worth talking to?"

Medwick hesitated, then said Yes, there was. He said there was a bell captain named Lew Henderson who seemed to know everything about everybody. He admitted he was prejudiced, but we had asked a question and he was answering it. He said he understood that Henderson had served in the navy before taking over as bell captain at the Miramonte.

Navy! That rang a bell. Alan Rogers had been in the navy, too. Well, there were millions of other men who had served in the navy. It probably had no significance, but it was an angle.

We thanked Mr. Medwick and he thanked us for thanking him. After he'd gone, we looked at each other.

"Any ideas?" inquired Marty.

We said we didn't have any ideas. We agreed that it was the most complicated god-damned mess we'd ever run across. We batted the ball back and forth trying to see whether one of us might have latched onto something that the others had missed. No one had.

"What now, Marty?" I asked.

"I'm sticking around here," answered Walsh. "Meanwhile, Danny, you've got a job. I want you to shake down Clive Barton's apartment. But good. There's always a chance that you'll come up with something. A chance, but not a hope."

"And eventually," I said, "I suppose we'll get some sleep, huh?"

"Like hell you will. On a case like this, Danny, you work till you fall on your face. And speaking of falling: be sure you go straight to Barton's apartment. I don't want you to detour by way of Bunny Gilson."

13

THE APARTMENT Clive Barton had shared with his father was just about what you'd expect it to be.

The building was old. It was shabby in a genteel way and the apartments were comfortable but old-fashioned.

The Bartons lived in Apartment 9 on the second floor of the Maybank. That was on Franklin Avenue. From the front you could see and smell Hollywood Boulevard a block southward, and from the rear the mountains rose, sharp and impressive. The neighborhood was marked by slow and not too dignified decay; it was accessible to markets, restaurants, stores, theaters, television and radio stations, and a profusion of bars in which you could find casual and serious drinkers, B-girls, youngsters in uniform, wide-eyed tourists obsessed with the idea that they were seeing Life, and the customary assortment of bush-league bookies, wise guys, hicks, gamblers, promoters, would-be talent scouts and agents, and a variety of females with prominent bosoms and free-swinging hips. It was located in the Hollywood Division of the Police Department, and the cops who were assigned there usually were kept busy and interested.

I was joined at the Barton apartment by Sergeants Ford and Hubbell of the Hollywood day watch. They had been routed out of bed early and had been partially revived by fresh coffee. Mr. Barton had given me his key, but had begged off from accompanying me. He said he preferred to stay with his daughter, which was natural enough. To us it was a murder case: to the surviving members of the Barton family it was a shock.

The apartment had a large living room, two bedrooms, two

bathrooms, a small kitchen, and, in these days of high prices, it wasn't a bad buy at the \$225 per month Ellis Barton had told us he was paying. It was a furnished place and looked it.

I briefed Ford and Hubbell, and we started our shakedown. I chose Clive Barton's room and the other two took the rest of the apartment.

One thing became instantly apparent: the Barton men were not lacking in the personal possessions which money can buy. Clive Barton's hanging closet and dresser drawers were loaded with suits, slacks, sports clothes, shirts, underwear, fancy socks, ties, pajamas, handkerchiefs . . . most of them on the expensive side. None of the clothes seemed old, which had no significance because the Bartons had only lived in California for about a year and a half and one of the weaknesses of new residents is to try to look like Californians. Ellis Barton's wardrobe, of course, was more conservative.

Clive's room was the smaller of the two bedrooms and was fairly neat. Whether the neatness was the result of his own efforts, or because the Maybank furnished daily maid service, I wasn't sure, but it would seem that when Clive had left the place that day he hadn't expected to get murdered.

The shakedown is a vital, boring part of police work. You probe into every nook and cranny, hoping for a lead and wondering whether you'd recognize one if it hit you in the eye. You evaluate everything in the light of your knowledge of what has happened; you try to find that little indication, that tiny directional arrow which is called a clue. Most often you don't have any luck.

One of the boys called to me from the sitting room. I went in and found Sergeant Hubbell reading a letter. He said, "The late Mr. Barton was in love."

"So-o . . . ?"

The letter—as we later established—had been written by Clive. It was on social stationery of the better grade. The envelope in which he had planned to mail it was still lying on the desk, untouched. I was sorry he hadn't addressed it: it could have made things so much simpler.

The handwriting was poor: the kid had evidently learned to

write the modern way . . . practising what first-grade teachers call push-pulls and roll-arounds.

But what the missive lacked in graceful chirography it more than atoned for in earnestness. This was it:

Darling, darling, darling!

I dreamed of you again last night. I always dream about you. You are always in my thoughts as I wish you were always in my arms.

Why won't you believe that I love you more than any other man ever loved a woman? Why do you keep on putting me off? Why do I have to exist on the memory of having possessed you and yet of knowing that you will not be mine for always? I remember every soft curve and contour of your beloved body. Please stop being so unkind to me. I want you and need you. I want

The letter ended right there. Abruptly. Clive had not even gotten around to addressing the envelope. He hadn't given us a hint as to the identity of his reluctant passion flower.

Bill Hubbell said, "The guy had it bad, didn't he, Danny?"

"Yeah . . ." I studied the letter carefully. "All we've got to do now is to find 'darling, darling, darling!' That should be a cinch."

"You meet any gals yet who might fit that description?"

I told him he wasn't familiar with the Miramonte or he wouldn't ask. Most particularly I told him about Bunny Gilson. He and Sergeant Ford whistled appreciatively and wanted to know why things like that didn't ever fall into their laps—or vice versa.

Bill asked, "How does Margaret Graham fit the picture?"

"Hell," I said, "anybody can be in love with anybody else. Clive Barton could have been cut in the head over Margaret without it meaning that she had ever given him a tumble."

"So what about his remembering her contours . . . like it says in the letter?"

"That adds up any way you want to make it. What he writes about wanting her and remembering her doesn't prove that he's ever had any."

"Would Graham be the kind of gal to give?"

"My guess would be No. But a volcano can look like just another hill before it erupts."

"Jeez! Danny . . . you sure are getting lit'ry."

"Ain't it the truth?" I put the letter and the unaddressed envelope into a larger envelope, and stuck them both in my pocket. Maybe Mr. Barton or Sandra could help me out. Then the three of us hunted earnestly for more of the same. We found no other letters written by Clive Barton, and—what was perhaps significant—we found nothing that could conceivably have been written by the gal of his dreams.

Bill Hubbell said, "There's something in that letter that sticks with me, Danny. He says that he has 'possessed' her. When a guy writes that to a dame, he means what it sounds like. He ain't talking about dreams. And he ain't kidding her."

I agreed with him, but said that the letter hadn't been mailed. Maybe he never had intended to mail it.

"Then why the envelope?"

I said it all made a lot of sense or no sense at all. The women I'd met so far during the investigation didn't seem to fit. No matter how I sliced it, it still came out salami.

When we left the apartment, dawn had come. Ford and Hubbell invited me to join them for breakfast, but I said I'd better be getting back to the Miramonte. "The assistant manager out there is queer as a three-dollar bill," I informed them. "I think he likes me."

"Maybe he's the one Clive Barton was writing to." Hubbell was half kidding, half serious. I said I'd think it over. I started back, having gained nothing but a letter written by a dead man and a fresh feeling of futility. What I craved at the moment was some shuteye: one hour, two hours—ten hours if they'd let me have it. I had talked to so many people and thought so many thoughts that I was dizzy.

When I parked in the gorgeous grounds of the Miramonte, one of the patrol-car officers came over to tell me that Bobby Lowe wanted to see me in Cottage 16—the cottage in which Clive Barton had been so efficiently exterminated. He suggested that I take it on the double. I didn't need the suggestion. Captain Lowe is skipper of the Homicide Division, my big boss. If he had come all the way from downtown, it meant either or both of two things: (a) the case was more important than it seemed at first; or, (b) (and most likely) the luxury background had excited the press and they were building it up.

Captain Lowe was one of the youngest captains in the Department. He was a good-looking guy with more than a hint of gray in his black hair. He had a fine record, and was now head of Homicide, in which Division he had served as policeman, sergeant, and lieutenant.

I reported on the apartment shakedown. I handed over the note Clive Barton had been writing. Lowe and Marty Walsh and another detective from Homicide studied it.

"*Cherchez la femme*," said the skipper. "That means: Find the dame for whom Clive had hot pants."

Walsh said wearily, "From what I've heard, it'd be simpler to find one that didn't affect him that way."

"This one seems extra special. I detect a strong note of frustration."

"That could be Margaret Graham. She could frustrate me in ten seconds flat."

Captain Lowe said he was leaving Marty and me in charge, with such additional help from downtown or West L.A. as we needed. He said he'd stick around awhile, and told Marty and me that we needed sleep. I said that was a good idea, and asked whether he wanted us to talk to the surviving Bartons or whether he would take that job. He assigned me to do it. He said, "You're young, handsome, blond, and exciting, Danny. You're practically irresistible. Maybe you can get more out of Sandra Barton than I could. She might know the identity of the lady for whom that note was intended."

"The old man might, too."

"It's possible. After you get some sleep and a shave and a

shower and maybe some fresh linen . . . well, you should be right on the ball again. I don't want to crab your act and Marty's. And I think you're correct in believing the note could give us a payoff lead."

So Marty and I left Captain Lowe on the scene with a handful of his boys and a dozen insistent reporters and press photographers. We headed downtown, too exhausted to be tired; too mixed up to be thinking.

Marty dropped me at my apartment. He said he'd pick me up at three o'clock. We'd eat together and go back to the Miramonte. He asked me what I thought of the deal.

"I don't," I said. "I quit thinking hours ago. Right now I wouldn't even swear that Clive Barton is dead."

14

DURING THE FIVE DAYS that followed, several things happened. Suspects buzzed around our heads like flies, fancy theories exploded or led nowhere, an assortment of odd characters presented us with an odd assortment of clues, and contact was established with major police departments all over the country—particularly New York.

And I found myself falling in love with Sandra Barton.

The process of falling in love cannot be described with any exactitude. You're drifting along, doing your job, having fun playing the field, when—bang! just like that—something happens. All of a sudden you find yourself in a daze, walking on air, sleeping on clouds, thinking fatuously, trying to remember bits of poetry you learned in high school, and regarding the future with hope, fear, and uncertainty. You stop thinking of women as a group and concentrate on one of them, and you find in that one all the attributes, all the promise, all the warmth and desire and friendship you've ever wanted. At least that's how it was with me.

Oh, I had known other girls. Not enough to disturb my conscience, not too intimately to cause worry . . . but none of my past experience had prepared me for the shock of going completely overboard.

It all took shape and became irresistible during that fateful five days: a period of hard work, of the funeral of Clive Barton, of the inquest, of interminable examination of witnesses, of comparing notes with other dicks, of finding myself—along with Marty Walsh—practically dug in at the Miramonte.

I told myself that it couldn't be happening to me—that I shouldn't let it happen—and I was as powerless to prevent it as a pebble would be unavailing against the rush of waters in a great river. Love came in from left field: swiftly, unrecognized, unexpected. It destroyed my balance, my thinking, my common sense. I found it useless to argue against myself. I knew that Sandra didn't play in my league; I realized that my salary wouldn't even provide 10 per cent of the luxury to which she had been accustomed; I felt out of place in her '53 Cadillac convertible and bewildered by the nonchalance with which she bought things at exclusive shops and signed checks for meals that cost so much they made me shudder. I forgot my old precept of love 'em, lay 'em, and leave 'em. Sandra got into my blood so deep I couldn't get her out. I felt eager and humble and demanding and grateful . . . and there was nothing I could do about it.

It was a fantastic courtship. It was all in line ôr duty, but before I knew what was happening my emotions had quit punching a time clock. I didn't start work at four in the afternoon and knock off at midnight the way the book at Homicide required. I was with or near Sandra every moment I could spare, and while I never lost sight of the fact that there was a problem to be solved my thoughts were concentrated on the future, and the fragrance of orange blossoms haunted me.

It started the afternoon following the untimely demise of Clive Barton. I found myself in Sandra's cottage, talking to the girl and her father. I showed them the unmailed, unfinished love letter I'd picked up in Clive's apartment. They both identified

the handwriting as being Clive's. They discussed what they knew of Clive's love life openly and frankly.

I said, "Maybe you have some idea who the letter was intended for. Just make a guess. You don't have to *know*."

Sandra was hesitant and embarrassed. Mr. Barton was more direct. He said, "My son was always imagining himself in love. He wasn't very discriminating. I don't know of any way to narrow down the field."

"But this was recent. He probably started this letter yesterday morning . . . the night before, at the latest. So we'll try to figure what girl was the main object of his affections as of recently."

They looked at each other. "Bunny Gilson?" asked Ellis Barton, directing the question at Sandra.

"Not likely . . ." Sandra was trying to help. "The letter sounds frustrated. Nobody—not even Clive—would ever have been frustrated by Bunny."

"You mean she was promiscuous?"

"No. Just generous."

I said, "Valerie Clark would have been too old for Clive, wouldn't she?"

"No woman would have been too old. That's a terrible thing to say of one's brother—especially under these circumstances—but that's how it was. Valerie claims to be thirty-two. She apparently has lots of money. . . ."

"And Clive was broke?"

"Not broke. I gave him more than any young man should have needed. Dad did what he could for him. But Clive and Mrs. Clark were friendly: that's as far as I can state with certainty."

"I thought Lance Holloway was Valerie's particular boy friend."

"She wasn't that particular. She liked all young men."

"Was there any ill feeling between your brother and Holloway?"

"Not that I know of."

I said, "How about Margaret Graham?"

"She wasn't his type. She was polite to him because she and I were friends."

"He was shot in her cottage, with her gun."

"I know. . . ." Sandra looked bewildered and lovely. "But Margaret didn't shoot him."

"You believe her story?"

"Completely. In the first place, she would have no reason to lie. Protecting oneself against a prowler is natural. You said yourself that if she had told that story, the investigation would have been a mere formality."

"That's just it, Miss Barton. Why was her story different? What was she covering? Suppose there *had* been something between her and Clive . . . something she wouldn't have wanted Alan Rogers or Jim Fletcher—or any of her other friends—to have suspected? And don't tell me she wouldn't have a reason. She is a highly successful business woman. Scandal could wreck her reputation and her business."

Sandra said steadily, "I refuse to believe that Margaret Graham was having an affair with anybody."

"This is 1953, Miss Barton."

"And Margaret is Margaret. She's—she's . . ." Sandra groped for words and I thought of the old gag: "She's impenetrable, inscrutable, and impregnable," but I laid off.

What I *did* say was that women were hard to figure, and that one woman usually couldn't tell how another woman would act with a man. It wasn't a profound observation, but it happened to be true. Sandra said, "You don't like Margaret, do you, Sergeant?"

"I neither like nor dislike her. That isn't my job. I've been trained not to be influenced by personal feelings. (*How little I realized then what was happening to me with Sandra!*) The fact that I don't react to Miss Graham means nothing. I don't react to Valerie Clark, either." I paused long enough to light a cigarette. "Any other women either of you know about?" I asked.

Again that hesitation, that embarrassed exchange of glances between father and daughter. Ellis Barton said, "Clive liked Myrtle, didn't he, Sandra?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Who's Myrtle?" I inquired.

"Myrtle Zeigler. She's the chief switchboard operator here at the Miramonte."

"What sort of a girl is she?"

"Nice. I'm not talking about her morals. I don't know anything about those, and wouldn't pass judgment if I did. On duty, Myrtle's 100 per cent efficient. Away from her switchboard, she's just a chubby, moderately pretty, fun-loving girl."

"You know her personally?"

"Yes. Clive brought her over here two or three times. I liked her. If I could have promoted the friendship between her and my brother, I would have. She was the kind of natural, normal girl who would have been good for him."

"He dated her?"

"A few times. I don't know what happened on those dates. He . . . well . . ."

"Please go on, Miss Barton."

"Well, if you must know, Clive was addicted to boasting about his conquests. I don't believe he told the truth very often."

"Did he ever boast about Margaret Graham?"

Sandra looked at me in surprise. "No. Come to think of it, he never even suggested that there had been anything between them. Maybe that was because he knew she was my friend and that I wouldn't believe him."

"Or," I suggested, "it could have been that there *was* something to boast about . . . something on which he didn't need to reassure himself. Now don't get angry, Miss Barton. I'm just thinking out loud. Now then: back to your brother. Any other candidates?"

She said, "I hate this, but you might as well have it, Sergeant. There is a girl named Trixie Wright. She's Valerie Clark's personal maid. She's as cute as a candy rabbit. Brunette. Big eyes. Vivacious."

"You think there could have been something between her and Clive?"

"Yes."

"That's the first direct affirmative you've given."

"There's a reason, Sergeant. Clive had been out with Trixie a

couple of times. After one of those excursions he told me about some trouble he had with Lew Henderson, the bell captain. It seems that Lew considered Trixie his personal property."

I drew a deep breath. "Sometimes, Miss Barton, it seems that the world would be better off if there weren't any such thing as sex."

I tossed the remark lightly, just to ease the tension. In the silence that followed I looked up and caught Sandra's eye.

She was looking at me intently, as though a fresh idea had just come to her. She crossed her legs. I caught a brief, intriguing glimpse of bare flesh above the top of her stocking.

"Maybe the world would be better off," she said quietly. "But it would be awfully lonely."

That's the moment when the first symptom of love hit me. Not the glimpse of thigh, not the words, not the glance. Or maybe it was a combination of all. All I'm sure of is that from that moment on, Miss Barton ceased to be just another woman and became Sandra.

15

MY NEXT STEP up the emotional ladder came two days later, after Clive's funeral, when Sandra told me she wanted to see me alone. She said she was frightened.

There's no more effective appeal to a man than to call on him for protection. Some women know that, and others don't. But all men know it—whether or not they're smart enough to peg it down with words.

The way Sandra talked, I knew she was scared . . . and I had figured she was the sort of woman who wouldn't scare easily. If Sandra was frightened, it could be important to know what she was frightened of, and why.

We were alone in the sitting room of her cottage. Dinner had been served to us there—at her insistence. She had invited

Marty Walsh to join us, but he begged off, saying that he had more important things to do elsewhere. He beckoned me outside and said, "She's hot for you, kid. Make the most of it."

"Marty!" I exclaimed in mock horror. "Not on duty!"

"Ah, hell, Danny—I don't mean anything like that. I mean you should explore her mind, not her—"

"I know what you mean."

His eyes narrowed. "You're kinda off the deep end about her, aren't you, Danny?"

"Could be."

"Watch your step. On you, polo wouldn't look good."

The dinner ended, the little wagons had been rolled away. Outside, the heat of the May day had given way to a pleasant coolness. Sandra produced tiny fragile glasses containing brandy and benedictine, and a box of fat, expensive Havana cigars. She patted a place next to her on the sofa and waited until I had relaxed completely.

"Danny," she said suddenly, "I'm frightened."

"Of what?"

"I don't know." She edged imperceptibly closer. "I can tell you what happened, but not why."

I waited.

"During the past thirty-six hours I've had four telephone calls. From men."

"That could be natural," I said, with a ponderous attempt at gallantry.

"I think there were two different men. If the calls were all from the same man, then he deliberately disguised his voice. He threatened me."

"With what?"

"Nothing specific. He—or they—said I'd better watch my step or I'd get the same thing Clive got."

"What was he driving at?"

"I don't know." She was twisting a filmy handkerchief into a little ball. "I know I'm upset, but I'm not imagining the threats. I asked what I was doing that was wrong, and the voice said I shouldn't cooperate with the police like I'd been doing. He said this was something big. I didn't know what he was talking about

or what he wanted me to do—or not to do. I asked, and he said, 'Call off the dogs.' He meant you and the other detectives. He asked me how I'd enjoy waking up some night to find my throat cut. . . ."

She looked at me for a long moment. Then her eyes filled with tears. I took her hand and patted it reassuringly. I wasn't prepared for the galvanic shock the contact gave me. I said, "Have you got any idea who was talking?"

"No-o. . . . After the second call, I had a chat with Myrtle Zeigler, the chief switchboard operator. I tried to trace the calls. No luck. I begged her to listen in on every call I got from that time on. She said she would, though it was against the rules. The next two threatening calls I got, she listened in. You can ask her about them. All she could tell me was that they came from outside."

"Could it have been Alan Rogers?"

"You get hold of an idea, Danny—you never let go. You keep harping on Alan and Margaret Graham."

"Why not? Clive was killed in her cottage. Rogers is Margaret's lawyer. He may or may not be her boy friend. He might be making a crude effort to scare you away from something."

"But I don't know anything, Danny. I don't know any more than you know."

"That makes you awful ignorant," I said. "Now look: something specific must have been said . . . there must have been some implication along with the threats. Try to remember."

Her effort to concentrate was lovely to look at. Finally she said, "There were two things, Danny. Neither of them made any sense."

"I'm listening."

"One time the voice told me that my brother had been moving in fast company when we lived in New York. He said something about narcotics."

That brought me up short. I said, "You were mighty close to Clive. Did you or your father ever notice anything. . . . What I mean is, is there any chance that your brother was a user?"

She looked horrified. She said she was positive there was nothing like that. She gave me the name of a Los Angeles doctor

who had attended Clive and said I could check with him. I made note to do it. If the lad had been on the stuff, a good doctor would have seen symptoms, and the name Sandra had given me was that of a reputable physician.

"Narcotics," I said, half to myself. "Tug Livingston was in that racket. Could it have been *his* voice?"

She said, "I'd like to say Yes, Danny, but I can't. I don't believe Livingston could ever disguise his voice so I wouldn't recognize it."

I was inclined to agree with her. But this was the third or fourth time that narcotics had been mentioned. The big boys in that racket are dangerous. They play for keeps and murder means nothing to them. I said, "Clive may have been involved innocently. Maybe they thought he knew something. Maybe he even did know something. They might figure he had told you."

"But he didn't tell me . . . not anything like that. And he couldn't have been doing anything profitable, Danny . . . because he was always after me for money. He was weak, Danny, and vain: maybe he was a borderline psychopathic case. But there wasn't anything criminal about him."

She was getting all wrought up. And suddenly the telephone rang. Sandra jumped as though she had been shot. I asked whether there was an extension phone in the cottage, and she said No. I told her to answer the call. Her end of the conversation indicated that she was terribly frightened. . . . I couldn't tell it by her words because she never seemed to get farther than "Yes . . . No . . . I understand . . . Who is this? . . . What do you want me to do?" That sort of thing. Then I heard a click at the other end of the line and she put the receiver back on the cradle. She was shaking all over. I crossed to her and put my hand on her shoulder. I tried to quiet her down. When I had succeeded, I asked whether it would be all right for me to have a chat with Myrtle Zeigler. Almost before she finished saying Yes, the telephone rang again. Sandra said, "Oh, it's *you*, Myrtle. . . ." She explained that she had told me about the listening-in process and said, "Sergeant O'Leary wants to ask you something."

I introduced myself to Miss Zeigler over the phone. She had

a nice voice, but I could tell she was upset. She told me that this call, too, had come from outside, that the caller had asked to be connected with Cottage 17 instead of asking for Sandra by name.

Myrtle then said that while she had listened in, she hadn't been able to make head or tail of what had been said. There had been terrible, awful, frightening threats (those were her words); the caller had definitely been a man. He had said—according to Myrtle—that Sandra had stuck her neck out by not following directions. She was to do everything in her power to throw the cops off the track. One sentence Myrtle remembered. The voice had said, "When your brother mixed himself up with the junk traffic, he was sticking his neck out. You better take care of yours."

Junk! That meant big-time narcotics. Opium. Heroin. Marijuana. I tried to calm Myrtle down. I asked her if she had any guess as to whose voice it could have been. She hesitated so long that I knew she had an idea and was scared to put it into words. I tried to keep my tone quiet and reassuring. And finally she said, "I know I'm wrong, Officer. . . . I just know it. I'm all nervous and unstrung. My guess doesn't mean a thing. But if you insist . . . well, if I hadn't been so jittery I'd have thought it was Mr. Wayne Medwick."

Wayne Medwick! The nice, friendly, dignified gentleman who had volunteered such plentiful and juicy information right after Clive Barton's death.

The idea was fantastic. But it wasn't the sort of idea you can toss away. I couldn't figure the man out no matter how far I reached. I saw Marty Walsh talking to someone near the swimming pool and I excused myself for a moment and went to join him. He came to meet me, and for a good reason: he had been talking to Tug Livingston, and Tug and I had already tangled. Marty knew it wouldn't take much to start ~~us~~ tangling again.

I was disappointed to see Tug there with Marty. That meant, for sure, that Tug hadn't been the person telephoning Sandra. Narcotics racketeer or not, he wasn't our boy on the telephone—at least, not this time. The idea occurred to me that he might be in on a deal with someone and have set up this alibi by

chatting with Marty while the call was taking place. But even though a dick is trained to accept the impossible, I still couldn't see Tug Livingston and Wayne Medwick mixed up in the same thing. No two men could have been more different.

I gave Marty a rundown on what had just happened. He said, "Could be."

He said he was going to get in touch with Communications and have them contact the police in New York and other Eastern metropolitan areas for any information they could give us on Mr. Medwick. He said he was going somewhere, far away from the Miramonte, to telephone so there could be no listening in on *his* conversation. Meanwhile, he said it would be a good idea for me to stick close to Sandra.

I went back to her cottage. Several things—nice things—happened before I again heard from Marty. In fact, it was almost three hours before he showed up outside Sandra's cottage and signaled me to join him.

"I've been in touch with New York," he told me crisply. "As far as a record goes, Wayne Medwick is clean as a hound's tooth."

"Then we can check him out?"

"Not entirely. There's something . . ." He lost himself in thought, and when Marty is thinking it's smart to let him alone.

He said, "There was one angle worth considering, Danny. For several years Medwick was associated in an investment business in New York with a man named Harvey M. Walton. Walton had no record, either. Nice, genteel guy. But he's dead. He died six months ago."

"Died of what, Marty?"

"Lead poisoning," answered Marty. "Mr. Harvey M. Walton was murdered."

16

DURING THE LONG PLEASANT EVENING when I'd been waiting to hear from Marty, I had been enjoying myself in Sandra's cottage. From the first she had called me Danny . . . and suddenly I found myself calling her Sandra. That made us all even.

We had been alone. I was cast in the role of protector. I didn't wear shining armor unless you could describe my \$69.50 ready-made suit that way. But I was there with her, ready to shield her from whatever it was she needed shielding from.

Sandra—who had been so quiet, so controlled, the night her brother was killed—was anything but that now. She felt that she was in danger. I agreed with her.

All this was before I got my final report from Marty Walsh. I told Sandra what Myrtle Zeigler had said about the telephone voice sounding like Wayne Medwick and asked her what she thought. She said the idea was ridiculous. I asked why, and she said there wasn't any reason—it was simply ridiculous. Period.

She sat close to me on the couch. She said, "Of course, Danny, I know that anything is possible, but this angle comes close to being impossible. Myrtle is a sweet girl, but she's probably seen too many pictures and television shows—you know, where the least suspected person is always guilty. Why, look . . . suppose it was Mr. Medwick. Doesn't it seem reasonable that he'd have made the voice sound like anything but his own?"

I nodded approvingly and told her she was thinking nicely. I said that was how it figured to me, too. "Medwick would make himself sound like Alan Rogers or Jim Fletcher or Lance Holloway or Tug Livingston, if he could. But he wouldn't ever sound like Medwick. And I think you're right about Myrtle, too."

She said, "You're just trying to pep me up, aren't you, Danny?"

✓ "Maybe."

"I need it. I'm afraid of being here alone."

I told her that the threats seemed to be just that: threats. I suggested that if she were afraid of being alone in the cottage, she should move into the main building or hire a companion.

She said, "I wish you could stay here with me, Danny."

"I wish so, too. . . ." I started it off lightly, then suddenly my humor went sour. What was meant to be funny came out serious. "You know I'd like to help, Sandra. It's my job—at least from 4:00 P.M. to midnight. But other times . . ."

"You could stay right here. We'd have meals sent in from the main building. Or I could cook for you. You have no idea how well I can hardboil an egg. And I'm a wizard on an electric toaster—provided I don't forget to plug it in. As for preparing instant coffee or opening sardine cans . . ." All of a sudden her voice rose to a wail and she flung her arms around my neck and clung to me, sobbing.

She didn't do anything else. Just clung. But when better clingers are made, I'll like to be the one to make them. Everything that had been dammed up inside her seemed to break loose.

For a long time I simply sat there like a dummy. Finally I put my arms about her in what was meant to be big-brother fashion, but I hope for the sake of someone's morals that no big brother ever felt the way Sandra made me feel. I heard her saying, "Hold me, Danny! Hold me tight! Take care of me! Don't ever let me go!"

I tried. My right hand slipped. It wasn't pushed, so I'll say it slipped. It was on her breast and suddenly a rocket exploded inside of me. I jerked my hand away—not because I wasn't thrilled with the rich, full firmness I had felt, but because I was too much thrilled by it. This wasn't a girl to make passes at . . . nor was it the time to make them. I wished for ten hands and permission to use 'em any way I wanted. Then I realized that I was going nuts. Two hands . . . that was all I required. The permission, expressed or implied, was the missing ingredient.

She didn't appear to know that I accidentally had given myself the thrill of my life. My hand moved again, and again it touched the same spot. Coincidence, of course; or perhaps the law of chance. That was it. With Sandra being constructed the way she was, and us sitting the way we were, it was impossible to keep off the grass. This time I didn't even try. I wasn't caressing her—that is, I'm sure she didn't think I was. And if I was thinking of something other than her troubles, you can mark me down as just a dirty-minded little boy. But ambitious.

We talked. Not too much, but enough. What we said didn't make too much sense. My arms grew tighter. She snuggled closer. My hands were out of control. I wondered whether there was anything in the police manual about comforting a bereaved and frightened principal in a murder case. If there wasn't, I contemplated writing a new rule. No detective sergeant had a right to feel as good as I was feeling. Maybe a detective sergeant didn't have any right to feel.

All of a sudden she turned her face up to mine. I saw her eyes, her partly opened lips. Dumb as I am, I didn't need to be goosed into the next step. I kissed her.

That was when my world turned upside down. Almost thirty years of age, and I knew now that I had never before been kissed. This was bigger and better and sweeter and longer and more devastating than any kiss I'd ever dreamed about. It made a wreck out of me, and at the same time made me feel strong enough to move mountains, though not strong enough to move my hands.

Whatever was happening, I loved it. This wasn't any cut-rate seduction scene. This was the real McCoy. I wasn't thinking of sex except in a legal way. I wasn't on the make. I wasn't doing a damned thing except to find myself falling in love. It was a gorgeous feeling.

That first kiss led to others. It was I who broke out of the clinch. I said something, but it didn't come out as I intended it should, because my voice was trembling. I slid away and she pulled me back. She said, "I'm so unafraid when you're holding me, Danny. Don't move. . . ." And to make it sure I wouldn't,

she put my hand back where it had been before. I said, "You're not the one who's afraid, Sandra. I am."

"You couldn't ever be afraid."

"Don't kid yourself. I'm terrified of making a wrong move."

"There couldn't be any wrong move."

I was breathing as though I'd just finished the quarter-mile in world's record time. I sounded like an asthmatic locomotive. I said, "This isn't right."

"Nothing this wonderful could be wrong."

She took the play away from me. We were just starting to get really acquainted with each other when Marty Walsh tapped on the window. I jumped like a little boy who had been caught stealing cherries. I disentangled myself and staggered outside. Marty said, "You're all over lipstick, Danny."

I rubbed my lips with a handkerchief. I didn't say anything, because there wasn't anything to say.

"Sorry to interrupt romance," Marty went on. "Of course, I know you were just doing your duty. But couldn't it be that you were overdoing it?"

I said, "Marty—you don't understand."

"Like hell I don't. What's there to misunderstand? A big-muscled guy like you in a clinch with a gorgeous girl. On a sofa. Your right hand kneweth not what your left hand was doing, but I'd say neither of them was idle."

"She was hysterical."

"Who wouldn't be, with that going on."

"I'm in love with her, Marty."

He made a derisive sound. Then he must have seen my expression because his voice became gentler. "Don't get up on your ear, Danny. If you're in love with her, that's different. But how did it happen all of a sudden?"

"How can a guy answer that? Weren't you ever in love?"

"Couple of dozen times. But on my own level."

"There's no level to a thing like this. All right, Wise Guy—go ahead and laugh. It happened to me and I couldn't help it. It's happening right now. It'll keep on happening. What can I do about it?"

"Just what you were doing, I reckon. You didn't look like

you needed any instruction. But get a grip on yourself, kid. Don't take it too seriously. Sure, she's a swell dame. But you're not in her class. How do you think she'd like being the wife of a cop? How do you think she'd like swapping that sleek Caddy for your battered old heap? How do you think . . . God-dammit! Danny—take your fun where you find it, but don't let yourself get burned. And if you're serious about Sandra . . . don't let her get hurt, either."

It was good advice: kindly and well meant. He said, "Honestly, I'm not trying to deflate you, Danny. I like you. But get wise to yourself. You're the big man in her life at this moment because she needs a man who carries a police badge. You step into the scene invested with all the official power of the great city of Los Angeles. You're sympathetic and attentive. You're male . . . or so I've heard. When someone is drowning, they don't inquire the name of the firm who manufactured the only available life raft."

Marty was talking like a father, like an older brother, like a friend. He finally got me down off my cloud. And that was when he told me that a former associate of Wayne Medwick had been murdered in New Jersey six months previously. That bit of startling information did more than all the talking in the world to make a working policeman out of me again.

I said, "Were Medwick and this Harvey Walton partners at the time?"

"No. They had split up eighteen months before that."

"Trouble?"

"First reports indicate no. Apparently, they continued to be close friends."

"Where was Medwick when Walton was killed?"

"The Miramonte records show he was right here. That is, he was a permanent guest and was paying room rent. But he could still have flown east overnight, done the job, and returned to California without being missed."

"We could check the airlines' passenger lists."

"And probably discover nothing. If Wayne Medwick was flying east to knock a guy over, he'd have traveled under another name. I'm having the records checked, just in case."

"Then you don't think . . ."

"You said it, Danny. I don't think. I ask all the questions and get all the answers—most of them wrong. All we need, either of us, is one right answer. Of course, we must remember that Wayne Medwick gave us a lot of valuable information. At the same time we shouldn't classify it as accurate information. Maybe he saw two men entering Margaret Graham's cottage before Clive Barton was killed . . . and another man going in after the killing. Maybe he didn't. We have only his story to go on."

I said, "Suppose Medwick himself was one of those three men?"

"Could be, of course. But if he were involved, why didn't he just keep his mouth shut?"

"He might have figured that someone else would have seen what he saw . . . and have planned to throw us off the track by appearing to cooperate."

Marty favored me with a broad, friendly grin.

"You're already a great lover, Danny O'Leary," he said. "Do you have to be a smart cop, too?"

17

IT WOULDN'T BE FAIR to say that I moved in with Sandra, but it also would not be strictly accurate to say that I didn't.

Under ordinary circumstances the police department cannot assign detectives to bodyguard work, but these conditions weren't ordinary. Sandra Barton was the sister of a man who had been murdered. She had been threatened. All of us shared the premonition that the end was not yet, that all the cards hadn't been dealt, that the final play hadn't been made. So it seemed smart policy to keep an eye on Sandra. What happened during the course of keeping an eye on her was strictly her business and mine. It was a good business.

Marty and I were doing the leg work. But we were only the visible parts of a vast machine. All of the specialized departments at the City Hall were contributing. Swiftly and surely they were getting together all the dope on every person even remotely concerned with the death of Clive Barton. Maybe the blond kid had been unimportant when he was living: as a dead man he sure held the center of the stage.

The Narcotics Division was very much on the ball. So were the other groups of highly trained specialists: Burglary, Robbery (on the jewelry angle), Bunco-Fugitive, Records. They were in touch with law-enforcement agencies all over the country, especially New York and New Jersey. The latter State came into the picture when it developed that Harvey M. Walton had met his comeuppance on a lonely road near the delightful little town of Red Bank, not too far from the swank Rumson Country Club. From what I heard, it appeared there couldn't be a nicer spot to get murdered in.

From the East we got photos of the .22-caliber bullet which had been extracted from the body of the late Mr. Walton. It didn't check with the bullet that had killed Clive Barton. It didn't check with guns owned by any of the persons who were known to have been on terms of intimacy—homicidal or otherwise—with Clive. We were reaching far in trying to tie up the two deaths, but in police work you've got to reach.

Marty and I talked to anybody and everybody: sometimes together and sometimes singly. One evening I found Lieutenant Walsh walking on his heels. He admitted that he had just come from an interview with Bunny Gilson. I said, "With your virtue intact, I hope."

"Why should you hope anything like that?"

"Do you mean you would permit sex to rear its beautiful head while you're on duty, Lieutenant?"

He dismissed my kidding with a single graphic word. Then, with a faraway light in his eyes, he said, "What that gal needs is a pair of asbestos pants."

"Did you get anything out of her?"

"I didn't get nothing. But I could have, Danny—I sure could have."

1 "How did Tug Livingston react to your interest in Bunny?"

"That son of a bitch. I'm sorry I didn't let you keep punching the evening he tee'd off on you."

"So am I, Marty. Cutting that guy down to size would be just my dish."

Marty swore genially. As he turned away I said, "Hell of a chaperon you are, Mister Walsh. You lay off my love life, and I'll give you yours. As a bonus, you can have Virgil Forsythe."

What Marty said then I wouldn't even remember. I grinned after him and then walked in the general direction of Sandra's cottage. She wasn't there, so I made my way to Cottage 9 to call on Mrs. Valerie Clark.

Valerie was entertaining Lance Holloway. I'd met them both, but not in such a domestic atmosphere.

The first thing that knocked my eye out was the cottage itself. The others I had seen were all right in a modest, luxurious way. Number 9 was the ultraest ultra I'd ever seen. No matter what it cost her, it was worth it. In, around, and over everything was the pervasive fragrance of big money: the personalized interior decoration, the homey little touches like champagne and caviar, the humidior of expensive cigars, the privately owned oil paintings on the walls, the cute little personal maid and the uniformed chauffeur who was doing something to one of Valerie's cars outside.

Valerie herself was something for the books. She admitted to being thirty-two years old, and that was giving her the breaks by eight or ten birthdays. She was wearing harem pajamas which did nothing to conceal a figure that was still pretty neat considering that Bunny Gilson had described her as a "nice old lady."

Valerie's hair was of a reddish hue which never had existed elsewhere on land or sea. She was over-rich, over-done, over-made up . . . and yet somehow you couldn't help liking her. Maybe you could see pathos in her valiant effort to maintain the illusion of youth that was lost.

Lance Holloway fitted right in. He was six feet tall and weighed around 175. Once upon a time he might have been handsome. Now, he merely looked dissipated and spoiled.

He was sprawled out in a deep, comfortable club chair. There was a drink at his elbow, a cigar in his fingers, and in the glance he turned in my direction there was nothing but disdain.

Valerie fluttered about, being the cute, coy hostess. She wanted to know whether I were hungry or thirsty. I had the feeling that she'd be generous to an excessive degree. If I had said that I was broke, that I needed a hundred bucks . . . I'm betting she'd have handed it over and been glad of the chance. Not because I was myself, but because she wanted all people to like her. Only trouble was that she had long since lost the ability to differentiate between the real and the phoney.

We finally settled down. Valerie was piling on the vivacity. She wanted to know how we were getting along. I said we were making progress but hadn't yet come up with any right answers.

"You will, though," she effervesced. "You detectives are all so smart."

"They are like hell." That was Lance Holloway speaking. "They get something simple, and right away they got to make a production of it."

Valerie wagged a reproving finger at him. "Now, Lance, is *that* nice?"

"Who gives a damn?"

"I think detectives are perfectly wonderful," she insisted.

"That's what they want you to think. If they weren't stupid, they wouldn't be cops."

"Now, Lance, if you know so much, why don't you tell Inspector O'Leary?"

"Inspector! Now I've heard everything!"

I said, "Listen, Mr. Holloway, there's no sense of you sounding off on me. Sure, I'm just a cop. And I'm sap enough to like being one."

"You got a badge and a gun, so you feel like a big shot."

"Maybe you've got something there. But lots of times—like right now—I feel pretty silly. We need all the help we can get. Maybe you could . . ." I let it hang there.

"You see, Lance! Detective O'Leary would appreciate your help. He just said so, didn't you, Officer?"

"I certainly did. And I meant it."

Holloway simmered down. He said, "I could help if I wanted to."

"I'd sure appreciate suggestions, Mr. Holloway. Maybe you've seen things we missed."

"I know plenty. I could break this case wide open. I could tell you something. . . ."

He cut it off. It was as though he were sounding a warning to himself.

I wanted him to go on with it. Sure, he was a louse, but human lice have a way of knowing important things. I made another pitch for his help, being careful not to make it too strong. This Holloway wasn't too bright, but a good cop never plays anybody for a damned fool.

Holloway said, "I've told several people what I know. But I ain't telling you."

"Why not?"

"You'll find out for yourself if you got any sense. Why should I tell you what I know so you'll get credit for having brains?"

"No reason, I guess." I lighted one of the cigars. "But if you were willing to help . . ."

"Maybe I will, one of these days. Meanwhile, I get a laugh out of watching you and this square Walsh keep on butting your heads against the wall."

I said gently, "You've got an idea why Clive Barton was killed?"

"Sure I have. And you'd see it, too, if you weren't so blind."

I had a hunch he wasn't kidding. I played along. I flattered him. I laid it on thick. I didn't get results.

He said, "Of course, O'Leary—I'm not kidding myself that you're taking me seriously."

That's where he was wrong. I was convinced that he knew something I wanted to know.

Later, I learned that my hunch was right.

18

DURING THE NEXT FEW DAYS, things happened.

Two or three detectives from the specialized Divisions downtown were nosing around. One of these was Bill Muncrief of Narcotics.

I had worked with Bill when we were both attached to Hollywood Division. He was short, stocky, good-natured, and sharp as a razor. He had been a navy flyer during the war. He didn't know all there was to know about narcotics, but he was learning fast.

You can't work Narcotics without playing ball with the other detective specialists. Men and women who have been hooked by dope will go to any lengths to obtain the stuff, or the money with which to buy it. They'll commit robbery, burglary, kidnaping, and even—on occasion—murder. The necessity for their daily fixes becomes the most important thing in their lives.

Usually the Narcotics boys are a frustrated lot. They can pick up users by the score, but that's small-time stuff. Occasionally they grab a peddler—some furtive character on Skid Row—selling his bundles of cut stuff for the money that's in it, or merely to get dough to finance his own addiction. But the bigger boys, the smarter guys on the upper rungs of the ladder (most of whom are not addicts), are harder to catch than fleas on a sheep dog.

This Clive Barton case had "narcotics" written all over it. Bill Muncrief had the hunch that the murder was incidental. The background was plushy, and that's where you usually find the important operators.

We had reports on several of the people around the Miramonte: Bill had even more reports. He was keeping an eye on Tug Livingston, for instance, and on anyone who had seemed to be more than a hello-acquaintance of Tug's. He told us lots

of things, including an interesting story concerning Wayne Medwick and Harvey M. Walton.

A big narcotics deal interests the Feds as well as the local police. Thorough investigation had been made. On the surface, everything checked: Medwick and Walton had continued to be friends long after their partnership had been terminated. They made money by the simple expedient of buying stocks when they were down and selling them when they were up. They had dealt always through reputable brokers. Their income-tax returns indicated that each of them earned an average of \$40,000 annually on which tax was always properly and promptly paid.

"But there's one thing," said Bill, "that sticks out like a sore thumb. Both Medwick and Walton reported all their profits. But they didn't report their losses."

I said that didn't make sense. Reporting losses would have reduced income tax. Muncrief said, "Yeh! sure. But suppose all either man was interested in was accounting for luxury living? Suppose they just wanted snoopy guys like us to believe they had legitimate incomes to finance the kind of life they were living?"

Marty's eyes had narrowed. "That would indicate that the money they were making on stock speculation was unimportant: that they were covering up their real activities."

"Right. At least that's how my skipper figures it. Make hunks of dough, live like a king, show the Government enough legitimate income to account for your expenditures . . . and salt the rest away."

"How? Where?"

"That's being checked on. Cash is the answer, of course. Bank boxes. But where the bank boxes are, or what names they're in . . . that's something we haven't come up with yet." Bill's eyes lighted approvingly as he glanced toward the pool. "Could that be Bunny Gilson?"

"It not only could be," Marty said. "It is. All of her."

"Ten years from now, she's going to be fat. But right now . . . mm-mm-mm!"

"Want some of it, Bill?"

"On duty?"

"You might learn something."

"What she could teach me wouldn't help in my profession."

He flashed Marty his boyish grin. "Now, to get our thoughts back above our belt buckles, I'll hand you ^{one} more piece of information: not definite, of course, but positive."

"Christ! You sure talk like a cop. Give!"

"Would it interest you to know that when Clive Barton was living in New York he was known to have had contacts with the late Harvey M. Walton?"

"What sort of contacts?"

"We haven't established that. The contacts seem to have been infrequent and casual . . . just as though they were designed to look that way."

"Any tieup in New York between Clive and Wayne Medwick?"

"Not that we've been able to discover." He fired up a cigarette. "Now you boys know all that I know. I hope it makes you better and wiser men. Me, I'm going to settle myself in a big comfortable deck chair, stare at Bunny Gilson, and wallow in nasty thoughts."

He had given Marty and me a new conversational ball. We sat there tossing it back and forth. Some things tied in too neatly, other things didn't tie in at all. Marty said, "Look, Danny—on a deal like this you gotta watch yourself. Natural, normal things can assume unnatural and abnormal significance. So Barton and Walton knew each other. So they were both murdered. It could mean something and probably does, but you must remember that it might simply be coincidental. One thing I'm betting on, provided Bill Muncrief's information turns out to be true: Walton and young Clive Barton don't figure to have been partners. From everything we've heard of Clive, he wouldn't be trusted by any smart operator in any racket. But he could have been a messenger, a go-between."

Marty said he wanted to browse around and talk to a few people. He suggested that I do the same. Dusk was descending upon us. I went to Sandra's cottage full of noble love and biological urge, but all I got in answer to my knocking was silence.

I looked over the parked cars in the lot and didn't see hers. Well, that would have to wait till later.

I loafed around the pool for a while. I watched a slim young lady taking a tennis lesson from a bored and lazy pro. I drifted into the main building and ducked away from Virgil Forsythe. Darkness had come, the dining room was filling up, the cocktail bar was doing a land-office business. In escaping from Virgil Forsythe I shoved through a door and found myself facing a switchboard.

Myrtle Zeigler was putting through a long-distance call. She looked excited. She completed her call and I heard her ask the other operator to look after the board for a few minutes. She removed her apparatus and came across the little room, grabbing my arm and propelling me toward a side door. She said, "Let's go where we can talk privately."

"Important?" I asked.

"Very."

We found ourselves outside. There were big healthy hibiscus bushes all around us. We could hear the kitchen clatter and enjoy the aroma of expensive cooking. Myrtle drew me deeper into the darkness and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"I'm worried," she said.

"About what?"

"A telephone call I listened in on."

"To Sandra?"

"No. She has nothing to do with this. You know, Danny—one of these days I'm going to lose my job. I listen in all the time. I'm not supposed to."

"You're supposed to do your duty as a citizen—to help the police." I was talking to give her time to get herself under control. "About this conversation you heard . . ."

"Lance Holloway called Margaret Graham just a little while ago. He said he had to see her as soon as possible. He said it had to be at a spot where they couldn't be observed or overheard. She invited him to her cottage, and he said that was a chance he wouldn't take. She asked him why it was so important, and he said . . . he said . . ."

She seemed to run out of words. I eased her along as gently as I could.

"Lance Holloway said something—I can't remember his exact words—about Clive Barton's death and about some jewels. He said he and she—by 'she' I mean Miss Graham—should have a confidential chat. She wanted to know more, but he wouldn't tell her anything else. He simply said that she would be wise to meet him and that if she refused he wouldn't be responsible.

"Anyhow, Sergeant, they made an appointment to meet in Royal Palm Canyon at ten o'clock tonight. He told her to be alone. She promised."

I said, "Where in the canyon?"

"He told her to go north on 101 Alternate and to make a speedometer reading where that road meets the Palm Canyon road. She was to go two and four-tenths miles into the canyon. He said there was a little side road at that point. She was to drive about fifty feet into the side road, turn out her lights, and wait."

"And . . . ?"

"She agreed. But, Sergeant—she isn't going to be alone."

"No . . . ?"

"She telephoned Alan Rogers, her boy friend, right away. She told him what had happened. He said he was going with her. He said he'd hide in the back of her car. He said he wouldn't dream of letting her go alone. He said it would be too dangerous. It was finally agreed that she would start out of the hotel grounds in her car, meet him at a gas station near the corner of Sunset and Barrington . . . and that they'd go on together."

I glanced at my watch. It was already nine-twenty. I thanked Myrtle and told her she'd been a great help. I sent her back to her job while I hunted up Marty Walsh.

I didn't find him right away. Where I found him and what he was doing with Bunny Gilson is his business. She invited me in, and said that it was all one big happy family. I figured it would be twice as happy if Tug Livingston had wandered in at the same time. I got it across to Marty that I had something on tap. We crawled into the police car, and I gave him a rundown. He was plenty interested.

• "Step on it," he said. "When we get about a mile and a half up the Royal Palm Canyon road, we'll park the car and go the rest of the way on foot. I think this could be important."

That's what the man said: It could be important.

How right he was!

19

HIGHWAY 101 IS TWO ROADS. The main highway cuts north-westward through the Valley. 101 Alternate runs along the Pacific Ocean. The two branches meet somewhere between Ventura and Oxnard.

We hit the Alternate and turned north. It was a newly worked six-lane highway with a lot of mountains on our right and a hunk of ocean on our left. There were miles and miles of beaches, miles and miles of parked cars. Some of the couples in the parked cars were enjoying the view.

We didn't do much talking because there wasn't any need. We were thinking the same thoughts, going around in the same circles. We were thinking about Lance Holloway with his furtiveness, his secrecy, his cloak-and-dagger rendezvous, his information about the Clive Barton murder and the unset gems which were safely in the custody of the Police Department; we were thinking that Clive had been shot in Margaret Graham's cottage, that she had taken everything too much in stride, that her story about finding the body might have been true, but that even if it was, it didn't check with the way we had found things; we were thinking that Alan Rogers could be a nice guy trying to help a nice girl, or he could be a pain in the neck trying to help a girl who wasn't as prim as she looked. We were thinking that maybe we were on a wild-geese chase, but that even if we were, we had no choice but to go through with it.

We almost overran the Royal Palm Canyon road. We backed and filled and finally eased into it. We took our own speedometer

reading and proceeded cautiously. No talking above a whisper, no lighting of cigarettes. Just an intense concentration on the business at hand.

At the 1.5-mile point, we pulled over to the side of the road and parked. There were a million stars overhead, but the canyon was dark and forbidding. Against the night sky the walls seemed to be rising straight up and threatening to topple over on us. We didn't see or meet a car. We saw no lights. We heard nothing.

We trudged along the side of the road. This wasn't the sort of place I'd pick to get lost in. We might as well have been a thousand miles from civilization for all the sign of human life we encountered.

We tried to estimate distance by measuring the time on our luminous wrist watches and figuring our walking speed. The road was narrow but well paved. And just as it seemed that we must be approaching the branch road where Lance Holloway had expected to meet Margaret Graham alone, we heard something.

We heard the sound of a motor starting. We heard the protest of tires and brakes as some driver made a tight turn in the canyon-off-a-canyon. The blackness of the night was pierced by two brilliant headlight beams. They came straight toward us.

Neither Marty nor I said anything. We drew our guns, just in case. In our left hands we held flashlights. As the car whirled toward us, we stepped into the road, flashing our lights.

The driver of the approaching car saw our lights. He rushed down upon us, and then applied the brakes suddenly. We noted that it was a shiny new '53 Buick convertible. Marty's voice cracked out: "Police officers. Turn out your lights."

There was a moment's hesitation, then the lights went out. That gave our flashlights a chance. It wasn't difficult to recognize the occupants of the car: Margaret Graham and Alan Rogers. We ranged alongside the Buick and Rogers' voice said, "Oh, *you*, Lieutenant." A hesitation, and then, "God! we're glad to see you."

Margaret Graham spoke. Her voice was far from steady. She said, "How did you get here?"

Marty and I crowded the car, keeping the two passengers in the glare of our flashlights. Sometimes expressions can fool you: more often, they're a help. The girl, Margaret, was up in the air a mile. Rogers was definitely unhappy, but still playing the role of calm, protective male.

Marty said, "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Lance Holloway."

"He . . ." Her voice cracked and Rogers took over. He said, "Holloway is up the road a piece, Lieutenant. He's dead."

"What do you mean: 'dead'?"

"I mean just that. He's been shot."

"By whom?"

"I don't know. We got here and saw no one. Margaret got out of the car and started looking. He was supposed to have been at a certain place. . . ."

"Hold it," commanded Marty. "Start at the beginning. Let's have the whole story the way it happened."

Rogers did the talking. His story tallied with what we had heard from Myrtle Zeigler. Up to a point.

"I was crouched down in the back of the car," he said, "to give the impression that Margaret was alone. We turned off into the side road—it's not much more than a trail. We snapped off our lights. We didn't see anything. We waited for some signal, but none came. Then Margaret said she would look around. She did."

"A few seconds later she cried out. It wasn't exactly a scream, but she sounded terrified. I clambered out of the car and went to her. Holloway's car was parked in the darkness: I almost stumbled into it. I saw someone slumped down behind the wheel. I turned on the dash light and recognized Holloway. I felt for his heartbeat. There wasn't any. We still don't know what he wanted with Margaret."

"How long you been here?" asked Marty.

"Maybe fifteen, twenty minutes."

"Did you see any other car?"

"No."

"You figure," asked Marty carefully, "that someone else knew of this meeting and beat you to it?"

"Unless Holloway committed suicide."

"That we can find out. Let's all take a walk."

Rogers protested. He said that Margaret Graham was unnerved, almost hysterical. He said she was not in any condition to undergo an additional ordeal. Marty said she'd have to. We all had to go.

So we did: Marty walking between Rogers and Margaret Graham, I a few steps in the rear.

"Either of you got a gun?" asked Marty. They both said No. Marty apologized and frisked Rogers anyway. No gun. We kept an eye on Margaret Graham, but we didn't frisk her. Police rule: no male cop is permitted to search a woman except under extreme and dangerous conditions. That was all right with me. I could think of a lot of gals it would be more fun to frisk.

We found Holloway and his car just as Alan Rogers had predicted. You didn't need an M.D. degree to see that the guy was completely dead. The blood was on his shirt and coat in the region of the heart. Using our flashlights we found the tire tracks made by Holloway's car, and those put down by Margaret's Buick. No others. Either the third car hadn't come up the little trail, or there hadn't been any third car.

"You didn't hear a shot or see another car?" That was Marty on the job again.

"No."

"You didn't exchange a single word with him?"

"I told you he was dead when we got here."

"You also suggested that it might have been suicide. It wasn't."

"What makes you so sure?"

"It doesn't add up right. If he'd planned to kill himself, why would he have wanted Miss Graham in on it?"

I started poking around with my flashlight. About thirty feet from the car I found the gun. I picked it up gingerly and showed it to Marty. It was a .22 High Standard. A hell of an efficient gun

"That ends the suicide idea," Marty said. "A guy wouldn't have pumped lead into his heart and then tossed the gun over yonder. Nice try, Rogers."

Alan Rogers got belligerent. He said, "I don't like the insinuation, Lieutenant."

"So sorry. Why the hell did you come out here, anyway?"

"To protect Miss Graham."

"Against what?"

"Against whatever might happen."

"Did you protect her?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't play cute, Rogers. You know exactly what I mean. Your idea in coming along makes some sense, I'll hand you that. But what I'm asking is something else. I'll diagram it. Did Miss Graham talk to Lance Holloway? Did something happen between them? Did you then 'protect' her? More specifically, did you kill him?"

"No."

"Did either of you ever see this gun before?"

They both said No.

"If Miss Graham had killed Holloway, wouldn't you say she hadn't, Rogers?"

Margaret broke in. "I didn't kill him. Neither did Alan. Neither of us had a gun."

"And you have no idea what Holloway wanted to talk to you about: what he meant about it being tied up with the killing of Clive Barton and those gems that you had been keeping for Sandra?"

"I told you all I know."

"Doesn't this trip out here strike you as being a rather silly procedure?"

"It does now, yes. But at the time it seemed like a good idea to do as Holloway suggested. Alan agreed with that. He insisted on coming along. I felt safe."

"Maybe Holloway did, too. You know, it's funny: two killings, in both of which you, Miss Graham, are involved. In both cases .22's have been used. A .22 is anybody's gun, but it is mighty handy for a woman. You owned the one that killed

young Barton. Are you sure somebody—Rogers, for instance—didn't present you with a new one?"

"I never saw the gun before. You can check that."

"No, lady—that can't be checked. If it was bought by you or by some friend from a reputable shop, that can be checked. But if it was come by through channels which are not ordinary, we can't check anything. One more question, Miss Graham: was there any tieup between you and Holloway?"

"What sort of tieup?"

"Emotional? A love affair?"

"Don't be absurd."

Alan Rogers broke in. He accused Marty of trying to twist circumstances to suit his theories. He said neither he nor Margaret intended to answer any more questions until they'd had a chance to think things over.

To my surprise, Marty took that calmly. He said he'd wait there with Rogers and the girl while I drove in to the Sheriff's substation at Malibu, made a report, and got them to detail a couple of men to give the terrain a going-over. I was also to notify Homicide, even though this killing had occurred outside the city limits.

Within forty minutes I was back, trailed by a car with two big good-natured deputies. Marty suggested that Miss Graham drive her car, taking me as a passenger, while he followed with Alan Rogers. Neither of our suspects was under arrest.

The Buick convertible was as smooth as butter. It flowed along the road under the expert handling of Margaret Graham. I relaxed and enjoyed it, but at the same time I studied the girl at the wheel.

She had drawn back from the threshold of a hysterical attack. She seemed calm and self-possessed. I could understand how she had made a success in business. If I were a woman and had consulted Margaret, I wouldn't dare dispute anything she advised.

During our drive to the Miramonte she didn't say much. Just one thing. She said, "I know what you're thinking, Sergeant, but you're wrong. I didn't shoot Clive Barton and I didn't shoot Lance Holloway. I've told you nothing but the truth."

**"Yes, ma'am," I retorted politely. "I'm sure you have."
But I wasn't sure. Not sure at all.**

20

WE REACHED MARGARET'S COTTAGE at the witching hour of midnight. A light was on in Sandra's place, and Marty suggested that I drop in casually. I didn't require any goosing.

Sandra was sitting on the couch with Myrtle Zeigler, the telephone operator. She was nursing an almost untouched Tom Collins while Myrtle was doing full justice to a drink which I guessed was a Cuba libré. I pulled up a chair, lighted a cigarette, and relaxed.

By me, Sandra was TNT. I tried to think of some rich uncle who might pass out peacefully, leaving me a million dollars so I could ask her to marry me. I thought of all my uncles, but they were all broke and all in good health.

I told them about the death of Lance Holloway. Myrtle turned to Sandra and said, "You see, I wasn't crazy. I knew something terrible was fixing to happen."

I said, "You weren't supposed to tell anybody, Myrtle."

"You didn't say that. Besides, she asked me whether there had been any calls for her."

"That wasn't for her."

"Well, right after I talked to you, she came in and I told her. And I mentioned it to someone else, too: so there."

"Who else?"

"Bunny Gilson. Mr. Medwick. Mr. Livingston. Mr. Fletcher."

"Why didn't you hire a radio station and broadcast it?"

"There were reasons why I told them. Mr. Fletcher said he had a date with Margaret Graham and Alan Rogers. I said there was no need for him to wait because they probably wouldn't be back for a long time. I told him they were meeting

Lance Holloway on a lonely road up some canyon. I said I was scared."

"Of course, you explained why you were scared."

"I have more sense than that, Danny O'Leary. I simply said I was getting fed up working at a place where murders happened every time a person turned around."

"Were Mr. Medwick and Mr. Livingston interested when you told them?"

"Oh, yes. Very. So was Bunny Gilson. And you needn't look at me like that. I felt I had to tell someone or bust."

"Next time," I said, "bust."

"Did I do wrong?"

"Certainly not. You only loused us up good. From what you've already admitted, you told everybody who would have the slightest reason to be interested, and you told 'em in plenty of time to let one or all of them into the act. You've been real helpful, Myrtle."

"I helped you and the lieutenant, didn't I? You wouldn't even have known about it if I hadn't reported." She polished off her drink and looked around for another. She wasn't exactly drunk, but she wasn't sober, either. I caught Sandra's eye and shook my head. Myrtle finally arose with great dignity and swayed toward the door. "I'm going home," she said firmly. "I feel kind of sleepy."

"Don't tell your story to anyone else," I advised. "Even after you're in bed."

She eyed me reprovingly. "That," she announced, "is double and tender."

She vanished. Sandra motioned for me to sit alongside of her. She put her hand in mine and said, "Poor Danny . . . nothing but trouble."

I leaned back and closed my eyes. I said, "Nothing wrong that a simple kiss wouldn't cure."

She kissed me. I said, "Bull's eye. Two more and you get a kewpie doll."

She earned the kewpie doll. I let my eyes close and kept my hands idle. I looked at her finally and saw that she was crying. "Poor Lance," she said. "Poor, poor Lance."

"Why poor? Wasn't he a Grade-A louse?"

"That has nothing to do with it, Danny. He's dead. Clive is dead. This whole place . . ." She shuddered. "The killings, the telephone calls I've been getting, the threats, the air of suspicion, the uncertainty . . ." The tears were flowing freely now. I did what I could to console her. I said, "Your friend Margaret was right on the spot, Sandra. She and her boy friend were awful surprised to see Marty and me. Could be that all they wanted was to get away from there."

"Danny! That isn't fair."

"Of course," I continued, "they both said they were on their way to notify the police. That can't be proved either way."

Sandra said, "Listen to me, Danny. You've got to quit thinking like a cop all the time. You've got to think like a human being, too."

"What does that mean?"

"If you could see people as people rather than as suspects, you'd be better off. I'm a woman. I know women. I know Margaret Graham. She couldn't kill anybody."

I didn't answer that. It would have started an argument and gotten us nowhere. So I took a different tack.

"I don't dig any of it, Sandra. Wherever you look, Margaret Graham is in the middle. And right alongside of her is this lad, Rogers. Tonight, for instance. And the night your brother was killed."

"Why do you keep harping on Clive, Danny? He was my brother and I loved him. But he was weak. Let's face it, he couldn't keep out of trouble. He didn't even try. No matter who shot him, he entered Margaret's cottage that night as an intruder. I thought then, and I still think, that he was after those jewels. He knew where they were; he had the key to the rosewood desk; he was lying on the rug in front of that desk when Margaret saw him—"

"She says. We found him on her bed."

"I suppose that means something, Danny. To me, it doesn't. I couldn't possibly swear to Margaret's virginity. But I would swear that if she chose a man to play around with, it wouldn't have been Clive. She disliked him. For a long time she wouldn't

say so to me because she and I were friends. But the night I gave the party, she refused my first invitation. She didn't want to have any more unpleasant experiences with Clive. Oh! I know what I'm saying sounds unnatural—not like a sister. I'd like to see you find the person who is guilty of either or both of these killings. But you'll never find him if you persist in riding this absurd idea that Margaret is involved."

I said I had to report to Marty. He'd be interested in hearing how efficiently Myrtle Zeigler had advertised the meeting in Royal Palm Canyon. I said it began to add up as another long, hard night.

"And when you knock off, Danny . . . what then?"

"Home. Bed. I'm bushed."

"How about coming back here for a nightcap when you're off duty?"

I told her that sounded swell, but it wasn't practical. I said I'd have to get home eventually, and Marty and I had one police car between us.

"Borrow mine," she said. "You can drive a Cadillac, can't you?"

"I could. But I'd be scared to death borrowing a car like that."

"Don't be silly, Danny. I'll be waiting right here. Maybe you'd like some bacon and eggs and coffee."

I said I'd be back. Hell! how could a man pass up something as delectable as bacon and eggs.

Marty didn't call it a day until 2:30 A.M. He said we could write our reports the next afternoon. When I told him that I was sticking with Sandra, he gave me a poke in the ribs, not too gently.

"Are the bluebirds singing in your heart, Danny-boy? Are you really in love?"

I said I wasn't. But I was lying.

When I returned to Sandra's cottage the bacon was sizzling and so was I. She made a pretence of eating with me, but with me there wasn't any pretending. I was hungry. She cleared off the dishes, rinsed them in the kitchenette, turned out all the lights but one, and joined me on the couch. She said, "I know

you've had a tough day, Danny, but would you mind putting your arms around me?"

I said I wouldn't mind. This was the life. Luxury. Ease. My arms full of beautiful girl. She said, "If you could have one wish, Danny—something reasonable—what would it be?"

"You," I said. "I'd choose being married to you."

"Don't joke, Danny."

"I'm serious. I love you. You asked a straight question and you got a straight answer."

She clung to me and started crying. She said, "That's the sweetest thing that ever happened to me, Danny. You really think you mean it—"

"I mean it, all right. And I'll say it again and again and again. I love you, I love you . . . damn it! I love you so much it hurts." I released her abruptly and got up. "I think I'd better be on my way."

"You can't go now, Danny."

"Why can't I?"

"Because I don't want you to."

She turned off the single light. In the semi-darkness she came to me and snuggled into my arms. "I need you with me, sweetheart," she said. "I don't want to be left alone."

She disengaged herself, but only partially. We walked into a bedroom which was as fragrant as heaven. She said, "What would be your second choice, Danny?"

"You . . ." My voice sounded unnatural. I heard the almost imperceptible sound of clothes dropping onto the floor. Then she came to me again . . . and I understood.

There's no use trying to describe what it was like. It was like a Paradise on top of a raging volcano. It was like all the wild dreams a man ever had. It was the impossible coming true, the incredible proving itself credible. It was jungle drums pounding and beating inside. It was ecstasy unbearable.

21

I WOKE UP AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK feeling rested, exhausted, and immodest. I could hear sounds from the other room, and the tantalizing aroma of good strong coffee was wafted to me. I slipped into the bathroom, took a quick, cold shower, dressed hurriedly, and walked back through the bedroom into the sitting room, trying—but without any success—to be non-chalant. Sandra was there, looking gorgeous and domestic in a cute little dress and a tiny flowered apron. She shoved a glass of orange juice at me, then a cup of steaming coffee. She waited until I'd gotten the early-morning taste out of my mouth and then she produced breakfast: poached eggs on toast, more bacon, and finally crisp waffles made right there at the table.

She said, "You know, of course, that you weren't the first. . . ."

I said Yes, I knew, but that it didn't matter. This was 1953, not 1890. I said I didn't care what she had done: the important thing was did she love me enough to marry me? She said she did. She said that her feelings didn't worry her—it was how I would feel later, after we'd taken the plunge. I knew what she meant: I was a cop, earning a modest salary. When I'd been on the job twenty years I could retire on a 40 per cent pension. If I served twenty-five years, the pension would increase to 50 per cent. That would just about pay for her lingerie. She said, "I'd be happy as your wife, Danny—but would you be happy? Wouldn't you always be wondering whether I was discontented? If I spent some of my own money—and I have a lot of it, Danny—would you think it reflected on you? Those are sensible questions, sweetheart. They deserve sensible answers."

"I want you."

"You can have me: any time, anywhere, any way. Let's let the intimacy build until the newness wears off. After that, if you

still want to marry me, if you think we could make a go of it . . ." She rose and stood behind my chair. She put her hands on my cheeks and pulled my head close against her breast. I was overflowing with love and the first resurgence of desire. I made motions to that effect and she laughed and danced away. "Not now, sweetheart," she said. "You're acting as though we were on a honeymoon."

"Is that bad?"

"I have some things to do. You have to go to work at four o'clock. Surely, you don't want to show up wearing a scarlet letter."

"But I can't help wanting . . ."

"I love you to want. I love for you to get what you want. But . . ." She was as embarrassed as a for-real bride. "I think we ought to converse a little."

"About what?"

"It doesn't matter. Something cultural. The weather. The state of the Union—"

"The union was swell," I said. "I loved it."

"Danny! We've got to at least pretend there's something in the world other than sex."

"Is there?"

She led me into the sitting room and refused to let me touch her. We sat in separate chairs, facing each other. She said, "I want to know everything about you."

"Okay," I said. "I started life at a very early age and nothing important happened until I met the most gorgeous, wonderful, exciting, fascinating girl in the world—name of Sandra Barton. Well, she and I . . ."

"You had your wish last night, didn't you, Danny. Suppose you had another wish?"

"Second order of the same."

"No, I mean something practical. We all have little desires—material desires. Maybe they stem from childhood, maybe they're adult things we haven't gotten around to achieving. Find out those little things about each other and you find yourselves closer—mentally and spiritually. Now, for instance, I notice that you don't wear a ring. Have you ever wanted one? Your Argyll

socks are pretty—but not very. You've been wearing Argylls ever since I met you. Wouldn't you want a whole drawer full of them? There must be something . . ."

"Nothing important," I said, getting what she was driving at. "Aside from you, my wishes are simple enough. I always have limited my wishing to things I figured I had a chance to get. Recently, it's been cop stuff. When I was a policeman in uniform, I wanted to be a detective. Then I wanted to be a sergeant. Now I want to be a lieutenant. My other wants are practical, too. I'd like to find some sucker who would buy my gun so I could get a Smith & Wesson Combat Masterpiece."

"Tell me more. That's *you* talking now: the you I want to know."

"I've got a Colt Police Positive. It's a good weapon, but cops are gun crazy. Maybe you'll learn that in time. They compare guns, buy 'em, trade 'em, equip them with new grips. Maybe it's because a gun can be so important: you never know when the right gun can save your life."

"But this Combat Masterpiece you were talking about . . . ?"

"Well, I don't need it really. But all the boys have gone crazy about that gun: the detective model with a four-inch barrel. It's a beautiful thing. Of course I could afford to go out and buy one, and yet I couldn't afford it. I have a good gun. It's a game: you want to change guns—you wait until you find some other cop willing to trade with you, or someone who will give you a decent price for your own gun. Then you buy the one you want."

"What's so wonderful about this Combat Masterpiece?"

"You'd have to be a cop to understand. It—well, it just fits, that's all. It snuggles into your hand so you hardly know it's there. You can adjust the trigger pull to a gnat's eyelash. One of these days I'm going to get me one. I'm working on a guy now, to sell him the gun I've got. He's just been transferred to the Detective Bureau. He won't want to keep his regulation six-inch barrel. Maybe he'll buy my detective model. Then . . . well, it's like this: suppose you wanted a Jaguar. It won't do anything your Cadillac won't do—but say you want it. Maybe you'd feel that it was silly to own two expensive cars. So you'd

wait until you could get rid of the Caddy. See what I mean? It has nothing to do with merely having the dollars you need to get something you want. Maybe a part of the kick is in getting it the sensible way."

She said seriously, "Thanks, Danny. You've told me more about yourself—your character—than everything else I've learned since I first met you. I understand you better."

A man likes to talk about himself. He likes to think he's important. And Sandra had gotten me started. I told her things that had happened when I was a kid, about how heartbroken I'd been in failing to make the high-school football team the first year I went out for it, about the army and my two-bits' worth of combat experience, about my work and the way I loved it, about what a swell guy Marty Walsh was and how flattered I had been when he picked me as a partner.

She produced shaving equipment and explained it had belonged to her brother. That was the first time that Clive and murder and unpleasant things had intruded into a perfect day. At three o'clock I telephoned Marty at his home and told him I was at the Miramonte. He surprised me by not countering with a wisecrack. He told me to stick around and he'd be there around five o'clock. He said he'd write the reports. He asked if I'd run across anything new and I said No. He didn't ask me where I'd slept or if I had slept.

Sandra invited me to have lunch with her. We compromised by piling into her snazzy car and going to a Drive-in on Sepulveda Boulevard. She said, "I'd like to ask a favor, Danny. Would you—could you—stay with me every night?"

I asked why.

"Because," she explained, "I'm afraid. Last night I felt safe. Happy, yes. But part of that happiness was because I didn't have the jitters. I've been afraid ever since the night Clive was killed. The telephone threats I've gotten have kept me nervous. I want you, sweetheart . . . but let's be honest: I want protection, too."

I said, "You think somebody might try something with you?"

"I don't know what I think, Danny. I believed I was getting myself under control; I hoped that Clive's death might be all

there was to it. Now that Lance Holloway has been murdered, I'm scared all over again."

"Of anybody in particular?"

"No-o-o. . . . You see, Danny—I don't know what I'm in the middle of. Clive always was wild. Dad and I never could do anything with him. He ran with the wrong people, did the wrong things, chased the wrong girls."

"You mean," I asked carefully, "that you don't really know anything about your brother's background—his way of living in New York or here?"

"That's it. Dad doesn't know any more than I do. Clive may have been mixed up in something big. That's what scares me. I don't know who to be afraid of or whether I need to be afraid. If you were with me . . ."

I said that sticking close to her would be a pleasure. I tried to keep it light, but it didn't come out that way. This was a scared kid. She was the girl I'd fallen in love with.

I didn't actually check in at her cottage. But I told Marty later that evening that I thought it would be a good idea for me to stick close to Sandra.

"Good idea, Danny," he said. "But what will you do on your days off?"

"Same thing, I guess, Marty." Then I gave him a little smile. "Only—perhaps—more of it."

22

NO USE KIDDING, WE WERE GETTING precisely nowhere on the Miramonte deal. When you hunt for a murderer, you also hunt for motive. We hadn't found either.

Usually, you have something definite to work on or a couple of prime suspects. The case may not work out that way: sometimes it doesn't work out at all, but all the time you're investigating you feel there's a chance that you'll get somewhere.

Marty and I agreed we were up the creek without a paddle. We weren't handicapped by lack of leads; our trouble was having too many leads.

Lance Holloway's death hadn't helped us. The way things looked, it could have been any one of a dozen important people. Nobody came up with an alibi, but we still couldn't pin anything on anyone.

Our search for the source of the gun that had been used to usher Mr. Holloway into the other world didn't pay off. Originally it had been sold to a reputable citizen who didn't know anyone mixed up in the case. He had loaned it to a friend who was taking an auto trip through the desert and who thought it would be fun shooting at stray tomato cans along the way. The friend lost the gun, offered to pay the original owner for it—and that was that. The loss of a .22 automatic didn't seem worth reporting to the police. It could have been found and then sold, swapped or given away.

What had happened on that side road off Royal Palm Canyon was anybody's guess. We were sure of only two things: Lance Holloway had known something we would have liked to have known, and he'd been rubbed out before getting a chance to tell it. We talked to Mrs. Valerie Clark, hoping for a lead.

She was all busted up over the death of her young boy friend. No, Lance had told her nothing except that he knew more about the case than all the cops put together. He had made mysterious references to the unset gems which had been found inside the front door of Sandra's cottage and had been turned over by her to Margaret Graham for safekeeping. We asked Valerie whether she had checked over her own jewelry; whether, by any chance, someone could have latched onto a mere forty, fifty thousand dollars' worth of stuff, removed the stones from the settings, and cached them in what looked like a safe place. She said she hadn't missed anything. She said that Lance Holloway wouldn't have tried to raise money that way under any circumstances. Apparently, all he would have had to do was ask her for it.

We had a chat with Trixie Wright, Valerie's personal maid. She was a former beauty operator who had learned her trade in Atlanta, Georgia, and finally encountered Valerie at Sea

Island, a resort in the same State. Trixie had been with Valerie ever since. She was a cute brunette, a good listener, evidently an excellent maid.

During the interview it became obvious that she was covering. Marty and I sailed right in. With some difficulty, we got our answer.

Trixie Wright was not only a good personal maid: she was also human. She wasn't exactly indifferent to men. She was friendly enough with Lew Henderson, the Miramonte bell captain, to be rolling in the hay with him. There was lots of hay around the Miramonte. A bunch of the people we had met seemed to regard sex merely as a pleasant way to pass the time. Well, I defied Marty to name any pleasanter way, and he couldn't. "But it seems," he said, "that around this joint they've been kinda overdoing it."

I inquired whether the biological bug hadn't bitten him, too. I mentioned Miss Bunny Gilson. He informed me that people who lived in glass houses shouldn't take a bath. I backed away. Sure, Sandra and I were playing house—but that was different. We were in love.

We had a talk with Lew Henderson, the bell captain. He said he was twenty-nine years of age. He was dark, wiry, and hep. One look at him and you knew for sure that he was always on the alert for a fast buck. He'd been in the navy during the war and didn't let anyone forget it. He had a contempt for everybody in the world except Lew Henderson. He said, "There ain't no use of you pumping me. I don't know nothing, and I ain't passing along no scuttlebutt. Somebody gets killed, somebody else doesn't. Either way, it's no skin off my nose."

We asked him about his relationship with Trixie Wright. We phrased our questions politely, using the legal terms for words that can more simply be spelled with four letters each.

He gave us the straight dope on that—his version of the low-down, anyway. His description of his affair with Trixie was a trifle less than chivalrous. We held no brief for Trixie, but no girl who was giving her all deserved to be described in the terms he used. He said frankly that he didn't give a damn about her; that he never went overboard about no dame; that

there was always plenty of that stuff around a place like the Miramonte.

He knew all the people in whom we were interested. He had known Lance Holloway particularly well because Lance was earning his keep from Mrs. Clark, and Valerie was somebody that a wise bellhop catered to, she being a lavish tipper. We went back over the night of Lance Holloway's demise and asked Lew if he recalled the happenings of that night: who parked in the lot, who drove out. He said insolently, "Look, you fellas: I see everything, but I don't pay no attention. People around here don't interest me. My world is divided into two groups: suckers who tip well and tightwads who don't."

Marty and I were having trouble keeping our tempers. We both knew that if we sounded off with Lew Henderson we'd have less chance than we already had, which brought our opportunity down to the irreducible minimum. Marty inquired Lew's opinion of the relationship between Margaret Graham and Alan Rogers. Henderson leered.

"You figure it," he said. "She ain't as icy as she looks. Her and this Rogers go for each other. What would be holding them back?"

"She doesn't look like the sort of woman who would play."

"Any woman will give if the right man asks her in the right way at the right time."

"Then you think . . ."

"I don't think nothing. I ain't paid to think. I'm paid to run the bell service in this joint. I'm polite and respectful to all the guests. Most of them never know I'd like to give 'em some good swift kicks in the pants."

"Got any idea about Jim Fletcher?"

"Miss Graham's other boy friend? Naaah! He's the noble type. Straight and honorable."

"You know Tug Livingston?"

Lew nodded. You could see that Tug was the type of man he admired. "Smart guy," he said. "Knows all the angles, and plays 'em."

"Is he around here much?" •

"He's picking up the tabs for Bunny Gilson. She lives here.

Yeh, he's around a lot, and who could blame him. A broad like her . . ."

"You ever try your luck there, Lew?"

"Not me. I got some sense. Tug Livingston ain't the kind of guy I'd want to get sore at me."

"He's tough, huh?"

Lew gave me a contemptuous glance. "You ought to know," he answered. "He hung one on your jaw the first time you got together."

Marty said, "Did you know Livingston has a prison record?"

"So what? So he got caught once. By me, he's still wise."

"One more thing, Lew—and this really could be important."

"If it's that important, I already don't know the answer."

"Clive Barton," persisted Marty, "was in love with some woman. That much we know. Did you see any signs of it when he was hanging around the Miramonte?"

Marty looked guileless, but he wasn't. Bring the subject around to sex, and Lew Henderson would talk.

"Barton played the field," Lew said. "Anyway, he wanted to. Far as I know, he never got to first base."

"With whom?"

"With nobody. He'd chase any fanny he could see. But he never caught up."

"Was he friendly with Margaret Graham?"

Lew Henderson said, "How silly can you talk? She wouldn't give him the time of day."

"But you just said that no one could know what went on in the bedrooms of the Miramonte."

His nasty little mind played around with that one. He said, "Might be you've got something there, Walsh. Who's to say Margaret Graham wasn't holding out on Rogers and Fletcher, figuring she might marry one of them . . . and at the same time sampling life with Clive Barton?"

"But if that were so," said Marty, with the meekness of a man who is seeking instruction, "why would he have been prowling Miss Graham's cottage the night he was shot?"

"Can you prove he was prowling? Can you prove that she didn't expect to find him there?"

"I wouldn't call murder a very sexy approach."

"Maybe she didn't want none of it right then. Maybe he got kissed off when she said No. Maybe he ain't even dead. I wouldn't swear to anything."

We thanked Lew Henderson for his cooperation. We walked together toward the swimming pool where some late bathers were splashing around before stoking up with cocktails.

Marty expressed his opinion of Mr. Henderson. It wasn't very complimentary. He said the guy had a mind like a sewer and the psychological equipment of a rat.

I said, "You think Lew knows more than he's telling?"

"I don't think he knows as much as he thinks he does. But if he did know something, we'd never find out."

"Why?"

"Because a guy like that never gives anything away. If he has any information of value, he'd sell it."

"To whom?"

"You're the one who seems to be on permanent duty around this place, Danny. Try to figure it out. All I'm saying is this: any time you see Lew Henderson getting chummy with somebody—man or woman—keep your eye on that person. It could be a lead."

23

THE PRESS DUBBED THE KILLINGS around the Miramonte "society murders." The hotel was "exclusive," the principals all "socially prominent," the women all "glamorous," the men all "prominent." Everything seemed to be high class except the lethal bullets which were just common ordinary unpedigreed lead.

Bill Muncrief of the Narcotics Division drifted out to the Miramonte one evening with information. We didn't know whether it meant anything—you never know for sure at that stage of a complicated investigation—but we were grateful for any help.

New York had been checking on Mr. Harvey M. Walton who had been rudely murdered a half-year previously in New Jersey. Mr. Walton, an ex-associate of Wayne Medwick, had lived quietly at an expensive apartment hotel on East 56th Street, New York—a joint called the Florentine. He had, apparently, been a gent of simple habits, not too strenuously addicted to dames or liquor or gambling. According to certain members of the staff at the Florentine, he had taken massages once a week, being visited by a masseur who invariably entered the hotel via the service entrance and used the service elevator. There didn't seem to be anything unusual about that until Bill gave us a composite description of the masseur. He sounded like Clive Barton.

Pictures of Clive Barton were sent to New York. The staff at the Florentine looked them over and said "Could be." They'd never paid much attention to the guy: a young man who wore a simple business suit, carried a black bag like a doctor carries, who said he was Mr. Walton's masseur and who didn't hang around long enough to impress himself on anybody. It was one of those things. Maybe you've got a fresh lead, maybe you haven't. Marty suggested that I discuss it with Sandra.

I was riding the rainbow. I was practically dug in at Sandra's cottage. I don't think Virgil Forsythe, the assistant manager, approved, but that was probably because he thought that sex between men and women was nasty.

I got kidded a little by the boys in the Department. They didn't carry it too far, though, because Marty had passed the word along that I was really serious, that I had ambitions to some day make her Mrs. Sergeant Danny O'Leary.

Sandra continued to receive threatening telephone calls. She believed she was in danger. No, she didn't know why. No, she didn't know whether it might be connected with the unset gems which she had found inside the door of her cottage a week before Clive's death. No, the man who telephoned her had never mentioned the gems specifically, but she had a hunch. Consider Lance Holloway, for instance. He had known about the jewels, and where was Lance now?

I asked her whether she thought she should mention the

subject herself the next time she was threatened over the telephone: just let the man know that she had turned the gems over to the police. She said, "No, Danny—no. The note that was with the jewels warned me specifically against that."

I told her she could mention the stuff in such a way that it wouldn't mean anything to her threatener unless he knew the score to start with, but she rejected that idea, too. She was frankly terrified. While we were talking about it, she started to cry. It took me a long time to quiet her down. By that time, we were both quiet.

The more I saw of Sandra, the crazier I was about her. She was beautiful and generous and sentimental and passionate. I kept pressing her to marry me. She wouldn't say Yes and she didn't say No. One day I got a letter from her. It read:

DANNY DARLING:

You can't realize what a thrill I get from the knowledge that you want to marry me. I wish my intelligence would let me do what my heart directs. Maybe, one of these days, when we're no longer hemmed in by these terrible happenings—maybe then we can be married. And if, in the meantime, I keep on saying No, you must still believe that I love you as deeply as you could ever want. So let's leave things as they are, for the time being at any rate. I love you, sweetheart: I love you.

Your

SANDRA

I folded the letter carefully and tucked it away in my wallet. It was something to treasure, something to reread when I felt blue or discouraged.

I got her to talk about her brother. I asked whether she had ever heard of a Harvey M. Walton who had lived at a hotel called the Florentine in New York. She thought for a while and then shook her head.

"Does the name ring any sort of bell with you?"

"No."

"Did your brother ever mention him?"

Again she hesitated in the effort to answer accurately. Then she said, "I don't think so. If he did, it certainly didn't register. Who was he?"

"Just a guy," I said. "We got the idea your brother might have known him in New York."

"Clive knew lots of people I didn't know."

I said, "Did your brother ever work as a masseur?"

She thought I was kidding. She started to laugh, and then choked it off when she saw I was serious. She said, "Honest, Danny, that's fantastic. Even if Clive had ever worked—which he didn't—much—it wouldn't have been at a job like that."

"Why not?"

"Because . . . well, you didn't know Clive. He would have thought being a masseur was beneath him. Besides, I understand that sort of work takes training. Clive never was the sort to learn anything involving effort or trouble."

"Yet you loved him."

"That I couldn't help. He was my brother. You can love a person and still be aware of his shortcomings."

"Like me, for instance. You say you love me, yet you can't help wishing I wasn't a cop."

She pulled her hands away from mine. She said, "That wasn't worthy of you, Danny. It was unfair and—and . . . well, cheap."

I apologized. I said I had just been kidding. But I hadn't been. Not all the way.

"Let me tell you something," she went on seriously. "Maybe it will help you to understand why I don't marry you right now. You are the snobbish one, Danny; not I. Because I'm better off financially, you think it makes a difference in my feelings. Well, it doesn't. You're the one. You carry a chip on your shoulder. I'm afraid you always would. If we were married there would be times when we would argue. I have a premonition that your defense would always be, 'So you're too good to be a cop's wife,' or something like that."

She was right as rain. I said I'd try to train myself to think differently. She forgave me promptly and effectively. After a long, long time she said, "This always makes me feel so close to you, sweetheart. . . ."

I said I hadn't been able to think of anything closer, and she put her hand over my lips. "Don't, Danny," she whispered. "Just keep quiet . . . and hold me tight. It's times like these that help me to forget my fear."

After another long time she said, "One of these days, Danny, I'll tell you something."

"Tell me now."

"No. This isn't the time—or the mood. When I tell you, you'll have to be thinking like a detective. Calm, cold, impersonal, inscrutable."

"With you, I couldn't."

"I mean it, Danny. A half-dozen times I've meant to tell you. Then I find myself backing away. I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"That you might think what I have been through had affected my judgment."

She was plenty serious, plenty upset.

"What's it about, honey?"

"It isn't a *what*; it's a *who*."

"Haven't I a right to know? Not as a policeman, but as someone who hopes to be your husband."

She lay rigidly beside me. After a long pause she spoke as though frightened by her own words.

"I'm worried about Dad," she said. "I don't think he's himself."

"Yes . . . ?" I waited.

"He has changed since Clive's death. Two or three times, Danny . . . Oh! I know you'll think I'm crazy . . . but two or three times I've thought that it was my father on the telephone. . . . I've thought my father was threatening me."

24

SHE HAD ASKED ME to be inscrutable. Well, I was that, all right. What little brain I possess quit functioning for several minutes.

Finally, I pulled myself to pieces, sat up, lighted a cigarette, tried—unsuccessfully—to blow a couple of smoke rings, and said, "You couldn't be kidding—not about something like that."

She said she couldn't be. She said, "Don't make me sorry I told you, sweetheart. I had to talk to someone about it."

I said, "What gave you this idea, Sandra?"

"Dad hasn't been the same since Clive's death. At first I attributed it to natural grief and shock. Then the change in his character became more pronounced. Recently, he's been avoiding me. When he can't, he sits quietly, staring at me, occasionally shaking his head. He has never actually said so, but I have a feeling that he blames me for Clive's death."

"What did you have to do with it?"

"I had been stern. I refused many requests for money. The evening he was killed, I asked him not to come to my party."

"I thought your father agreed that was a good idea."

"He did. But he seems to have forgotten that. He's forgotten everything except that his son was killed."

I said reasonably, "Look, Sandra—there's no sense flagellating yourself. Lots of nights Clive was on his own. The night of your party happened to be one of those times. If it was in the cards, it would have happened anyway."

She said, "Dad thinks I was wrong to tell Clive about where the jewels were hidden."

"You still think Clive went to Margaret Graham's cottage after them?"

"Doesn't that sound reasonable?"

"Maybe. He was after something—that's certain. But it may not have been the jewels."

"What else could it have been?"

"I can think of a good answer for that, darling, but when I do, you always get up on your ear."

"Margaret, you mean? That he may have had a clandestine appointment with her?"

"Yes. It adds. He knows he's not going to be missed at the party. He goes into her cottage. He doesn't turn on any light. She goes from your cottage back to hers—"

"I suggested that."

"You didn't tell it that way at first. You said you were short on some table stuff and intended to order it from Room Service, and that Margaret offered to lend you some of hers. Isn't that how it was?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly. "But it's still wrong, Danny. If she had planned to meet Clive in her cottage, she wouldn't have needed any excuse. The party had become a sort of a brawl, anyway. She could just have walked over to her place without saying anything. Chances are that I wouldn't have missed her. And another thing: she insists that Clive wasn't on her bed when she saw him. She says he was lying on a little rug in front of her rosewood desk in the sitting room."

"Suppose Clive was lying on her bed, waiting for her—would she want that known?"

Sandra shook her head miserably. She said, "Of course not. But Margaret is one of the smartest women I know. She wouldn't have told a story that could be so easily disproved."

"So we'll presume that her story was true. That would mean that someone entered that cottage between the time Margaret found the body and the time the first cops got here. That someone moved Clive into the bedroom. If that's the way it was, it had to be a man. A woman wouldn't have the strength. Clive wasn't dragged. He was carried. The man wouldn't be puny either. He'd be strong: maybe about as strong as Jim Fletcher or Alan Rogers. And if things were that way, why the hell did the person bother to dispose of the throw rug?"

Sandra said, "A man—hit hard by shock—could have done something like that. And don't ask me why. There isn't any 'why.' It could have been the act of a psychotic."

I began to get it. "You mean your father . . .?"

"Danny! Please try to understand me. Dad has been under pressure for years. He set himself up as a one-man shield for Clive. He could have seen my brother enter Margaret's cottage. He could have followed. He could . . . Oh! the more I put it into words, the less sense it makes. All I know is that since Clive's death, Dad hasn't been himself."

I got an idea. It was fantastic but possible. I said, "Suppose your father *did* see someone entering that cottage. Suppose he

didn't know it was his son. Suppose he went to investigate, and, in the dark . . ."

"Oh, God! No! Not Dad! And Clive!"

"You'd be surprised how accidents can happen. And if it were that way . . . well, we can make more plausible the thought that a man couldn't leave his son lying dead on the floor, that *he* might have carried the body to the bed, that he could have disposed of the rug so that the deception—conceived under stress of what psychiatrists call a 'condition of extreme agitation'—might not be discovered."

"But he'd have told the truth."

"You've just admitted that your father hasn't been himself since Clive's death: that his actions and reactions have been—let's call it 'abnormal.' Mind you, I'd never have thought of this idea myself. I'm not taking it seriously now. But when you tell me that you're afraid of your father—when you tell me you believe he may be the person who has been threatening you over the telephone . . ."

She said, "But Lance Holloway! Don't you think his death has some connection with Clive's?"

"Yes. And we have reason to believe that Holloway knew more than he ever got a chance to tell. Your father may have known of Holloway's date to meet Margaret Graham in the canyon: God knows Myrtle Zeigler spread the news . . . and that Mr. Barton followed Holloway and had left the canyon before Miss Graham got there."

She clung to my hand and kept saying "No, no, no!" over and over again. She said, "If it had been Dad, I'd have known. The night of the party . . . the night Lance was killed . . . he didn't act like a man who could have been involved."

"From what you tell me, Sandra, you've got that backward. He *has* been acting peculiarly. His actions have not been those merely of a bereaved father. If he is the person who has been threatening you, it might be he suspects that you know something. He could be disturbed by our intimacy—yours and mine. Perhaps, for your sake, we'd be wise to call it off until this whole thing has been settled." •

Her eyes grew big and round and frightened. "Not that, Danny.

I'm scared. I can't help it. When I'm alone, I get the shakes. It's only when you're with me that I've got my nerves under control."

I promised I'd play along with her. I told her that there couldn't be a nicer job in the world than being close to her always. Then I went off on another tack. I said, "We're jumping at a lot of conclusions, sweetheart. That's not good. We can take our theories and twist them every which way. For instance, suppose Lance Holloway shot your brother. Suppose your father knew it—or believed he knew it? Suppose he followed Holloway and killed him to avenge the death of his son? Don't you see, Sandra? We can't stick to one idea because we don't know which theory is right. Frankly, I wouldn't give a thin dime for either of those hunches."

"Then why does Dad . . . if he does . . ." She bogged down.

"I'm a cop, sweetheart; not a psychiatrist. I've been trained to think in straight lines. Though that hasn't been easy in this case. In all my experience, I've never seen so many loose ends. Marty Walsh is as bewildered as I am. Honestly, Sandra—I think this thing has gotten under your skin, too. I believe you're imagining things . . . particularly about your father."

"You don't know, Danny. You didn't know him before—so you can't see the change in him."

"Has he said anything?"

"Not directly."

"Can you say positively that you have identified his voice over the telephone when the threats have come through?"

"No—o . . . but the voice was disguised. Isn't there some way . . . ?"

"Plenty of ways. Putting a handkerchief over the mouthpiece, for instance. But look. Even if your father is involved, that wouldn't represent a physical threat to you. What I mean is: he wouldn't injure you, would he?"

She said, "I don't think so, Danny. At least, a couple of weeks ago, I wouldn't have thought so."

I lighted two cigarettes and gave one of them to Sandra. I was thinking about how I'd tell this to Marty Walsh and of how he would react. I was thinking that it would be a good idea to put a tail on Ellis Barton, just in case.

Sandra invited me to dine with her. I begged off: not that I didn't want to, but I was getting sensitive about the checks she signed for our meals at the Miramonte. How you could live there, pay your income tax, and not come out in the red was something I never had figured.

I said I'd look in on her later. That, I knew I would do. The more I had of Sandra, the more I wanted. I left her cottage and started in search of Marty Walsh. I didn't see him near the pool, but a cute little voice hailed me. It said, "Hi, Handsome." It was Bunny Gilson.

She was wearing so little that I was embarrassed. Not so, Bunny. She flashed me a big smile and motioned to the deck chair alongside the one she was occupying. She said, with her usual disconcerting directness, "Why do you play hard to get, Sergeant O'Leary?"

I made some inane answer about being the most gettable guy in the world. She said, "Then what's wrong with me?"

"Your boy friend, maybe. Tug Livingston doesn't like me."

"Oh, *him*? He's always popping off about somebody. And he doesn't like any cops."

"Do you, Bunny?"

"I think they're wonderful. So romantic and everything."

She started to tell me why I was romantic and wonderful. She didn't get very far. A harsh voice grated from over my shoulder. It said, "What the hell are you doing here, Big Shot?"

I looked up at Tug Livingston. I said, "Good afternoon, Marvin."

He turned purple. His fists clenched. He growled, "You been asking for it, Copper. . . ."

I got up. For a moment it appeared as though there would be action. Then another voice intruded. That one belonged to Marty Walsh. He said, "Break it up, you two. If you gotta fight, I'll get you booked at the Olympic. Meanwhile, let's all sit down. Maybe Mr. Livingston will be kind enough to tell us the story of his life."

25

MARTY AND I WENT INTO OUR ACT. He played the friendly role: I did the needling. It's a system of detective procedure that's as old as crime, and more often than you would suppose, it pays off.

Marty said, "What you boys all the time scrapping about?"

"I wouldn't mix with him," I answered. "He's just a tired old man."

Tug Livingston started to flip his lid. He was fifty-one, and sensitive about his age. His record dated back to Prohibition days, and I could well imagine that then he was really tough. As a matter of fact, he wouldn't be any soft touch now.

That "tired old man" line got him. There he was, paying the bills for Bunny Gilson and making motions like Casanova, and I had to come along and throw a harpoon into his ego.

Tug called me a few indecent names. Bunny Gilson leaned back in her deck chair, enjoying herself immensely.

She meant a lot to Tug Livingston. He probably thought of her in the old gangland phrase as his "moll." If she was aware of the difference in their ages, she gave no sign.

Marty turned his attention to her. He said, "Look, Bunny—I got to ask you an important question."

"That's wonderful, Marty. I love to talk about important things."

"This is different. You got to give me a straight answer."

"I will, Marty. You're cute."

"So I'm cute. Now here's what I want to know: was Clive Barton in love with you?"

"In love?" She puzzled over that one. "Why, no, Marty, I don't think he was. Of course, he was on the make for me, but that ain't the same thing."

"Did he ever write you any love letters?"

"No."

"Did he ever make a direct pass?"

"Goodness, no. He was scared of Tug. Tug gets real ornery when he's mad. He'd have been liable to beat Clive up."

Livingston broke in. "What's the idea, Walsh! If you want to know about me, why ask Bunny? I'm here, ain't I?"

"Yeh. But you don't like cops."

"And I never will. Especially some of them. But you seem less of a louse than someone else I could mention."

"Now, Marvin," I interjected. "No names."

Marty said, "I'll come to the point, Tug. Two men have been murdered here or hereabouts. If you're clean, the smart play would be for you to help us."

"I'm not giving away no information."

"Not even to save yourself?"

"You got nothing on me."

"Don't be too sure of that. Your personal history stinks on ice. Maybe we haven't got enough on you yet to make it stick, but we could sure give you a bad time if we had to."

"Go ahead, Walsh. One thing I learned long ago was never to expect a fair shake from the police."

"And that's just what I'm trying to give you. The deeper I get into this thing, Tug, the more it reeks of narcotics. You once served a narcotics rap. You handled big shipments and turned the stuff over to the smaller guys who, in turn, sold it to the real little fellows. How well did you know the big boys?"

Tug said, "Are you kidding? Do you really expect an answer?"

"Did you ever meet a New York man named Harvey M. Walton?"

I detected a flicker of Tug Livingston's eyelids, a tightening of the muscles around his jaw. He said carefully, "So what if I did? I met lots of guys."

"Named Walton?"

"Maybe."

"Where were you the night Walton was murdered?"

"How the hell do I know? I don't keep no diary."

"You knew he had been knocked off, didn't you?"

"Sure. It was in all the newspapers."

"Were you in on that?"

Tug uttered a four-letter word which seemed to relieve his feelings and embarrassed Bunny Gilson not at all.

"Did you know that there was a contact between Harvey Walton and Clive Barton?"

"I didn't know nothing about nobody."

"Did you know that Walton was one of the big shots in the narcotics racket?"

"Same answer."

"The way I get it," Marty continued in a conversational tone, "Harvey Walton never handled the stuff. He was an importer. He kept himself outside the danger zone as far as the law was concerned—but he obviously didn't carry his precautions far enough. So he wound up alongside a lonely road in New Jersey with a bullet in him."

"Maybe," suggested Mr. Livingston with an attempt at humor, "he didn't know the gun was loaded."

Marty laughed with simulated appreciation. I said, "Keep on being funny, Marvin, and first thing you know you'll have Bob Hope looking for a job."

Tug suggested that I do something connected with the moon—something that has always been considered a biological impossibility. Marty stepped in quickly.

"You know Lew Henderson, don't you, Tug?"

"The bell captain? Sure."

"He ever do any work for you?"

"Jesus Christ! How far will you cops reach to make something out of nothing? Even if I was still in the racket, do you suppose I'd use a snotty little bellhop?"

"If you happened to be in a jam, Tug, would you consider having Alan Rogers for a lawyer?"

Livingston looked at his girl friend and made a gesture. "Curves the cop is throwing now. He's trying to find out if I'm buddy-buddy with that cube."

"Are you?"

"Hell, no. And I ain't never slept with Margaret Graham, or wanted to. Also, this here Jim Fletcher ain't no pal of mine. And to finish it off, Walsh—this talk ain't gonna get you nowhere. If you ever want to take me downtown for questioning, you know

where to find me. But get this straight: murder ain't my line. It never was—and it never will be. Unless, of course"—he turned his gaze on me—"unless this half-ass detective rides me too hard."

Marty paid no attention. He was concentrating on something: I didn't know what. Mostly I listened, and meanwhile grabbed myself several eyefuls of Bunny Gilson. If we could have turned the calendar back two decades, you'd have said she was flirting with me.

I was reminded of the fact that I was supposed to be a policeman, not a connoisseur of the human form divine. I tossed a question at Tug, and refrained from calling him Marvin.

"What kind of a guy is Ellis Barton?" I asked.

My mild approach caught him with his guard down.

"The punk's father, you mean?"

"Yeh."

"Screwy. Looks all right. Talks all right. But from what I've seen of him since the kid was knocked off, the old man ain't got all his marbles."

Marty said, "Mr. Barton has every reason to be upset. To lose his only son . . ."

Livingston shrugged. "He don't mean nothing to me, anyhow. O'Leary here asked me what I thought, and I told him."

Lew Henderson stepped out of the hotel and headed straight for us. He walked jauntily, confidently. He cast an appreciative and appraising eye on Bunny as he joined our group, and she smiled at him radiantly. I saw a sharp, warning glance pass between Henderson and Tug Livingston.

Lew addressed Marty, his voice cool, self-possessed, professional, and insolent. He said, "Mr. Alan Rogers would like to have a little talk with you, Lieutenant. He's in Miss Graham's cottage. Mr. Fletcher is with them."

Marty thanked him and Lew turned away. Once again I intercepted a look that passed between the jauntily bell captain and the tough racketeer. Then Marty and I got up. We started off toward Cottage 16. I gave Marty a brief summary of my recent conversation with Sandra Barton about her father.

He was impressed. He said, "That checks with what Tug Livingston was saying. Maybe we're getting somewhere."

26

FREE FROM THE TENSION OF SUDDEN DEATH and sternly repressed hysteria, Margaret Graham's cottage and the three people in it gave an impression of rightness.

Night was approaching, and they were dressed for dinner: Not in dinner dress—nothing formal like that—but conservatively, as though they were headed for some spot where fancy sport shirts and slacks might be considered indecorous.

Margaret and Jim Fletcher were seated on the couch, sipping cocktails. Rogers stood in front of the fireplace, a glass in his right hand. They invited us to join them in a drink. "They're daiquiris," explained Margaret. "But if you prefer something else . . ." We took daiquiris.

Alan took over. He said, "I've been surprised that you haven't questioned Miss Graham and myself more thoroughly since the night Lance Holloway was killed."

Marty sipped his drink and said he hadn't got around to it. But now that he was here . . .

"I'll level with you," he stated with unexpected candour. "We haven't gotten anywhere. We don't know any more than we did when we started. . . . Correction: we know a lot more, but it doesn't come out even. That's why nobody has been arrested."

Rogers appeared to be surprised and pleased at the turn the interview was taking. He said, "Both Miss Graham and I seem to be the storm center of both killings. No need to rehash the details. Neither of us is involved except by accident."

"It wasn't accident," suggested Marty, "that sent Miss Graham into the canyon to meet Lance Holloway. And it wasn't accident that put you in the back of the car."

"The way you state it—it wasn't." Rogers was talking in firm, clipped tones; his phrasing was the carefully considered speech of an attorney. "It was accident that Holloway should have been killed before our arrival and that you should find us

driving away from the spot. Actually, we were on our way to notify the police."

Marty said it sounded reasonable enough. He said he might even be persuaded to believe Margaret's story of the finding of Clive Barton's body. "You see," he went on with disarming frankness and a certain hard-boiled charm which he could turn on and off at will, "we know that before Miss Graham went to her cottage the night of the original killing, two men were seen to enter. Separately. One of them was probably young Barton. We don't know who the second was. Between the time she found the body and the arrival of the police, another man entered the cottage. That man could have moved the body, put the gun in the bedroom, and removed the throw rug from in front of the rosewood desk. Either of the men we have been unable to identify could have been you, Mr. Rogers—or you, Mr. Fletcher."

"Why should I do a thing like that?" asked Rogers.

"One reason would be that you were trying to protect Miss Graham after the killing. By confronting us with a discrepancy between her story and the situation as we found it, we became confused. We still are. And, of course, either of you gentlemen could have been the one who followed Clive Barton into the cottage in the first place. Either of you could have killed him."

"But you don't think we did."

"Why don't I?"

"You wouldn't be talking so frankly if one of us were under suspicion."

Lieutenant Walsh smiled. "Don't try to outfigure a cop, Mr. Rogers. Let him outguess himself. It works better."

Jim Fletcher broke in with a question. "So I'm also under suspicion, eh?"

"We're interested in you, yes."

"I was around the night of the party, but I wasn't in the canyon when Lance Holloway was killed."

"You could have been, Mr. Fletcher. If their story is accurate, what's to say that you didn't beat 'em to the punch? What's to prove that you didn't get there first, kill Holloway, and move on before they arrived?"

Fletcher gave a brief, mirthless laugh. "Looks like a suspect

can't win. I'm not sore. You fellows are doing a job. But holy smoke! man—it's discouraging the way theories can be twisted into facts which are not facts. It makes a man feel helpless."

Marty said, "We're on your team . . . if you're innocent."

"We certainly had nothing against Lance Holloway."

"Not unless one or all of you were involved in the Clive Barton killing. In that case I couldn't give you a clean bill of health. The build-up to the meeting with Holloway indicated that he knew something. Someone wanted to prevent Holloway from talking. They used an effective method."

Margaret said, "But it's fantastic, Lieutenant. Like a class-B movie. Things just don't happen that way."

"They did, though."

Marty flicked his eyelids in my direction. That was my signal to move in. I said, "May I ask, Mr. Rogers, your exact relationship to Miss Graham?"

"I'm in love with her. I have asked her to marry me."

"Are you engaged?"

"No."

"Why?"

"You'll have to ask Margaret. She seems to have troubles choosing among her three loves."

"Three?"

"Myself, Jim Fletcher, and her business."

"That right, Miss Graham?"

"Fundamentally," she said. "I sound like a woman who doesn't know her own mind. Actually, I think I'm using the friendship of these two gentlemen as an excuse to remain single. I worked hard building up my business. In theory I could continue even if I were married. But marriage has its usual after-maths. . . . Domestic responsibilities. Babies. I doubt if my efficiency could be maintained at its present level."

"Then you're just not interested in marriage: is that it?"

Margaret Graham looked straight at me. She said quietly, "You've had me pegged that way ever since the night we met, Sergeant."

"What way?"

"Cool. Detached. Impersonal. Sexless."

I hoped my face did not betray me. She was right, of course. What surprised me was the accuracy of her summation.

She said, "You are wrong on all counts."

"I apologize. You see . . ."

"I see quite clearly. What it adds up to is that I happen to be not your type. For what it may be worth to you in the investigation of this case, let me assure you that I have every reason to know that I'm a normal woman in the full meaning of that word." She gave an embarrassed little laugh. "I know a psychiatrist in Beverly Hills," she said with a flash of humor. "He has the appearance and manner of a dead halibut. Overflowing with psychiatric double-talk. No, I didn't meet him professionally: I've never had need of a psychiatrist and I hope to God I never do. But his fishy manner—his habit of starting with a conclusion and then working back to a premise—that seems to be what you are doing."

I laughed out loud. For the first time, I found myself warming up to this female. Marty Walsh was grinning, too. He looked at me as though to say, "She sure caught you with your mental pants down, fella." I felt like a sap. It wasn't unusual for me to be one, but to feel that way was a novel experience.

I said, "Well, you told me off, but good. That clears the air." The look she gave me was friendly and human. "I'd like to ask a couple more questions. First, how well do you know Mr. Ellis Barton?"

"More than casually."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that since Sandra moved into the Miramonte, she and I have become close friends. That has brought me into frequent contact with her father."

"How do you like him?"

"How does anyone like the father of one's friend? The answer is that I don't really know him. I took him for granted. He was somebody who belonged with her and who didn't seem to rate a personal appraisalment."

"He's fond of his daughter?"

"That's another thing the average person takes for granted, Sergeant. I never used to question it."

"Never used to?"

I saw her eyes flash to those of Alan Rogers. There could have been a message, a warning, or nothing. But Margaret knew what I was driving at, and she didn't evade.

"I haven't seen much of Mr. Barton since Clive's death."

"Why?"

"I think," she said with delightful directness, **"that he suspects me of killing his son."**

Marty Walsh stepped in. He said, **"What change have you noticed in Ellis Barton since his son's death?"**

"He's been avoiding me. And he seemed to be different."

"Just with you?"

"No-o. . . . Sandra has been worried about her father."

"She said so?"

"Yes. She even asked me about this psychiatrist I was telling you about. She seemed to think that the shock of Clive's death may have induced a state of morbid agitation."

Jim Fletcher's hearty laughter boomed through the cottage. **"My God, Margaret,"** he said, **"I'll have to look into this psychiatrist fellow. You're even talking like him. What are you driving at—in terms that I can understand?"**

She said flatly, **"Sandra is afraid of her father."**

"Afraid of him or for him?"

"Both. She said . . ."

Margaret Graham started groping for words. Alan Rogers said, **"Why don't you ask Sandra direct?"**

"I have," I said. **"She tells me the same story. But she, too, could be imagining things."**

"That might also apply to me," stated Margaret. **"I was the person who found Clive that night."**

"So," said Marty, **"Mr. Barton has been avoiding you. You think you have observed a change in his character. So has Miss Barton. What sort of a change?"**

"I don't know. Sandra told me—as I said before—that she was afraid of him."

"But surely . . . his daughter . . ."

"Look, Lieutenant—I'm not going to make the mistake I just accused you of making. I'm not going to permit my thinking

to work back from a conclusion to a premise. I'm trying to stick to facts as I saw them, and as Sandra told me."

"You mean she's physically afraid?"

"I got that impression."

"One more thing . . ." Marty directed his question at the two men. "If Miss Graham were in trouble, either of you would go to any lengths to protect her, wouldn't you?"

They both said Yes.

"You understand, then, why we can't accept everything you say at face value?"

"We understand." Jim Fletcher was speaking. "But one of these days you'll come up with the truth."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"What makes you so sure, Fletcher?"

"Because you're trying so hard. I'm no expert, but I still don't believe that any man can get away with two murders in a row and not be caught."

Marty nodded. "I hope you're right, Fletcher. We'll keep on digging. And we'll keep an eye on Ellis Barton, too. If he's off the beam, he rates watching."

Marty rose and started thanking them and saying good night. I did the same. We stepped outside and walked toward the main building. He spoke, partly to me, partly to himself.

"Ellis Barton," he murmured. "He might be the answer."

Marty didn't know it then, but he wasn't too far off the target.

27

A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, Dr. Thadeus Warburton got into the act. It was Marty's idea and I passed it along to Sandra. She went for it whole hog.

First I asked her whether she could afford laying a hunk of dough on the line for something that might not pay off. She said she could and would afford anything which gave promise of helping her father.

Thadeus Warburton didn't come cheap, but then psychiatrists never do. Unless you're rolling in dough you can't afford an M.D. who ignores physical symptoms in favor of impressive gobbledy-gook that nobody understands except another psychiatrist.

No, I haven't got a mad on against psychiatrists. There are some mighty good ones, but there are a hell of a lot more who would make the world better off by digging ditches. The few I've met, the way they seem to work is by overwhelming you with double-talk and making you feel inferior. They don't listen to half you say and the other half they twist to fit their own preconceptions. Warburton was one of those guys.

He was the one Margaret Graham had mentioned. The guy was of average height, average weight, average coloring. I met him after Sandra had made the financial arrangements and instantly could see the resemblance between him and a dead fish. He had the same blank expression, the same lusterless eyes, the same odor. The only difference is that when you buy a fish, you pay for him and he's yours. When you buy a guy like Warburton, you get nothing but bills.

Warburton was instructed to make the acquaintance of Ellis Barton, to conceal from him the fact that he was a psychiatrist, and to attempt to determine whether there was any foundation for Sandra's fears. When I heard what he was charging, I knew that Sandra wouldn't be out of my economic reach very long.

Ellis Barton and Thadeus Warburton met by the swimming pool. That very evening the doc suggested to Sandra that the old man be hospitalized and subjected to a series of electroshock treatments.

Sandra was visibly shaken. She listened to a long, involved explanation of Mr. Barton's agitated condition and a further description of how good electroshock treatments would make him feel. Of course there would be a slight extra charge—enough to buy a fleet of Cadillacs—but the medic insisted that it would be advisable. The idea was kicked around before Sandra discarded it on the grounds that she opposed anything which would give her father a hint that he was under psychiatric observation.

Within three days Warburton claimed to know more about Barton than Barton did himself. He told us how Barton thought and why he thought it. He explained everything the hard way. I suggested that it would be smart to hire another psychiatrist to determine how psycho the doc was. Sandra didn't react any more favorably to the guy than I did . . . but for a while she was stuck with him, and we both had sense enough to know that we could be wrong.

One thing was sure: Warburton didn't play anything down. He described symptoms of mental instability and probable consequences which made my hair stand on end. After just a few hours of idle chit-chat he said, "One thing you must understand, Miss Barton: your father is definitely paranoiac."

She asked what that meant.

"I'll explain in simple language," he told her. "Paranoia is a mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions, and the projection of personal conflicts, which are ascribed to the supposed hostility of others."

"Is that bad?" she inquired.

"In the case of your father, it might prove serious. I would say that you yourself might well have become the focal point of his hitherto repressed hostility. My feeling is that he ascribes to you the troubles with which he now fancies himself beset. His delusion, if permitted to flourish, could well assume a homicidal tendency with you as the object."

"You mean . . ." There was fear in her voice. "He would—he might—"

"Precisely. It is possible. It is even probable."

"But, Doctor—isn't it natural that a man should be overcome with grief by the violent death of his only son? Isn't that a normal reaction?"

"My dear Miss Barton, I beg you to understand that there is no such thing as true normalcy. I think you were well advised to seek my help. I shall do what I can. The case interests me."

He tossed a lot more seven-syllable words at her and strutted off. I said, "How did you like him, Sandra?"

"I'm not required to like him," she replied reasonably. "I'm only obligated to pay him."

"Did you understand what he was saying?"

"No. Do you suppose he did?"

I shook my head. "But on the other hand," I stated, "you're right to be worried about your father. We'll keep an eye on him."

"One eye," she said. "With the other we'll observe Dr. Warburton."

I reported to Marty, in detail. I said, "This supposed expert thinks Old Man Barton may be off the beam on account of his son's death. He could be blaming Sandra. He could try some rough stuff. I don't ride along with all Warburton said, but then that's because I didn't understand more than 10 per cent of it. I don't think I was supposed to understand. All I know is that for Sandra's sake one of us had better stick as close to her as possible."

"How close can you get, Danny?"

"I asked her to marry me."

"Sorry. Not sorry that you asked her: sorry that I tried to be comic. She's swell, that gal. I'd like to be as lucky. What did she say?"

"No dice."

"Why, hell, man—you're bound to have that wrong. The girl is crazy about you."

"She says I'm snobbish. She thinks my resentment of her money would kill our chance of happiness."

Marty was silent for a few moments and then he nodded. "She may be right at that, Danny. Take stock of yourself. Maybe you'll see the light one of these days. Then you can marry Sandra and be able to afford your own psychiatrist."

"God forbid! Doctors for bellyaches, I can take. But when they start explaining why I think what I think . . . you can have my share, Marty—with six electroshock treatments thrown in."

We strolled back to the tennis courts. There was a hot doubles game in progress: Margaret Graham and Alan Rogers against Jim Fletcher and Wayne Medwick. They weren't tournament players, but they were good. Suddenly Marty said, "Clive Barton must have had some property of his own, Danny."

"I suppose he did. Why?"

"Let's say it wasn't any fortune. Let's admit that he was always hounding his sister for extra cash. He still was a long way from broke."

"Yeh . . . ?"

"The boys downtown have been checking, Danny. So far, Ellis Barton has made no move to probate any will Clive may have left, or to have himself appointed administrator of his estate."

I said that what Clive had possessed might not be worth the trouble. I said that Dr. Warburton would probably explain that Mr. Barton was seeking to avoid the realization of his son's death—subconsciously, of course. I said that I didn't think Ellis Barton's failure to start the usual Probate Court procedure meant a damned thing.

Marty didn't commit himself. He backed away from the subject of Clive's estate and explained some of the lines of investigation that were being followed all over the country and particularly in New York. He said that before long we'd know everything there was to know about all of them.

"And where will that leave us, Marty?"

"We'll figure that when the time comes. You know, Danny, I don't usually play hunches. A guy can trip over them more often than he can be helped. But this time I have a feeling that we haven't reached the end of our troubles."

I was impressed. This didn't sound like Marty Walsh. This sounded like a guy with a mild attack of the jitters.

"Anything special in mind, Marty?"

"I wish I had. I don't want anything else to happen. The newspapers have had a field day with this case. If someone else should get hurt . . . *Wow!*"

I asked him what I could do to help. He said Sandra was my job. Sandra and her father. He didn't kid me about my love life: he was deadly serious, deeply concerned.

"It's as though we had a warning, Danny. We know Sandra is worried. We know other people around here have noticed Ellis Barton's peculiar attitude toward his daughter. If the guy really has flipped his lid—and if something happened—Jesus! would we be in a spot."

It was finally decided that I was to continue as I had been doing. Basically, that would be a pleasure, but now the assignment had assumed sinister overtones. Marty told me he'd get relief for me on my days off and I said I didn't want any days off. I reminded him that I had a personal interest in keeping Sandra healthy and happy.

I felt the need to explain to someone—especially Marty. Oh, sure, he knew the score. He knew that Sandra and I had been playing mama-and-papa, and he wasn't lecturing me on morals. What I wanted him to understand was that this wasn't that sort of deal at all. I had a vision of the future when Sandra might be Mrs. Daniel Aloysius O'Leary, when she'd be living as my wife in a little home in some inexpensive tract. We'd be entertaining my police friends and their wives. That was the way I thought about Sandra . . . that was the way I hoped she would some day think about me.

Usually, you want a girl and you get her—that's enough.

It wasn't enough with Sandra and me. There was something between us that I couldn't explain even to Marty. So I simply told him I'd be around, he'd know where to get me.

"And you'll keep an eye on her old man?"

I promised. I knew Marty felt a premonition.

I wish I had felt one, too. Not that I could have prevented what happened . . . but maybe I would have gone at it differently.

Because something *did* happen. And soon.

28

MY REGULAR SHIFT IS FOUR O'CLOCK TO MIDNIGHT, but it had been a long time since I had worked regular hours. Overtime had become the rule, not the exception.

In the Department, you don't get paid for overtime. A record is kept and when it adds up to enough, you get extra days off.

I had been building up plenty of these extra days. I was fooling around with a plan that would give Sandra and me a nice long honeymoon. Maybe camping and fishing in the

Sierras, maybe an auto trip through the desert and mountains with long look-sees at the ghost towns in the Mother Lode country, and perhaps a visit to Virginia City in the Comstock. We'd live in nice hotels and we'd be on the level when we registered as man and wife.

Allowing plenty of time for this Miramonte mess to be cleared up, I figured I could take the last eight days off in July, then my two weeks' vacation time, then my eight free days for August and perhaps four or five overtime days—giving me around five full weeks. That would give us plenty of time to become acquainted.

On this particular afternoon, three days after the projection of Dr. Thadeus Warburton into the picture, I checked in at Homicide. The boys of the night watch all said Hello and indulged in a little kidding. You'd have thought, to hear them talk, that I did nothing but eat, drink, and make merry.

Anyway, the skipper called me in and said there had been six urgent telephone calls for me in the last two hours—all from Sandra, all asking me to contact her immediately. I felt a twinge of apprehension. I said, "Anything wrong, Boss?"

"No. Lindstrom and Johnny Thorne are out there keeping an eye on things. They'll stick around until you show. But you better call the young lady. She seemed definitely upset."

I called the Miramonte, asked for Cottage 17, and almost instantly heard Sandra's voice. She said, "Oh, darling, I'm so happy to hear from you."

"Same to you, and many of 'em."

"I'm scared, Danny. I need you."

"Look out your front window. You'll see a cloud of dust. That'll be me. Meanwhile, keep your shirt on . . . at least until I get there."

My effort to inject humor into the situation got nowhere. This girl was feeling way down low. I told the skipper about the conversation, asked him if he'd tell Marty I'd gone out in my own car and for him to check with me later. I started for the door and Captain Lowe flung a good-luck after me. "And don't do any crazy driving," he counseled. "You wouldn't be any use at all stretched out in the Georgia Street Receiving Hospital."

I didn't drive crazy. But I didn't waste any time, either. I had caught more than a hint of urgency in Sandra's voice. What I mean is that she didn't sound like Sandra. "Get hold of yourself, Danny," I told myself. "You're so much in love that you're acting like a goddam civilian."

I threaded my way through heavy late-afternoon traffic. I knocked once on Sandra's front door, and walked in. I looked her over, not being reassured by what I saw.

I was looking at a beautiful young woman who was scared green. She was twisting a filmy little handkerchief into a string, her eyes were big and somber. I'd never seen her this far gone. I put my arms around her and felt her shudder as she clung to me. I thought a little levity might break the tension, so I said, "How about playing psychiatrist, honey? You lie down on the couch and I'll do the rest."

She didn't think it was funny. She didn't think it was unfunny. She didn't think anything except that she was on the threshold of a major-league hysterical attack. I finally got her to sit on the couch and I perched beside her. I made a few silly remarks about the weather and how much I loved her and how I had missed her since the previous night . . . and then I asked, casually as possible, what was stewing.

She had difficulty explaining. That it primarily concerned her father was immediately apparent. She started repeating some of the things Dr. Warburton had told her.

I said, "Look, Sandra—that guy was a mistake. You keep on with him and he'll have *you* in a psycho ward."

"But he's a doctor," she insisted. "We can kid about him all we want, Danny . . . but he knows what he's talking about."

"The hell he does. Listen: a lot of these psychiatrists are smart Joes. Warburton ain't one of 'em. He has a big rep, sure; and a fancy income. But I been investigating him. Hell, honey, I wouldn't let that guy work on my little Boston terrier. Let me tell you what he did a few months ago. . . ."

She nodded, indicating that she was willing to listen. What I had to say wasn't important, but what *was* important was to get her off the hook Warburton had put her on.

I said, "This guy got hold of a patient six months ago: a nice

guy with a fat bank account. Just his meat. (The patient had a pain in his gut and a clinical history of gastritis. It turned out later that what he had was a peptic ulcer, but Warburton refused to buy that. He said the patient was psychotic. He was having delusions of pain. He told the family and the nurses that the measure of the guy's psychosis was the pain he imagined he had.

"So, all right. The poor man was hemmed in. The doc out-talked all of 'em. All the patient asked was to have a top-flight diagnostician give him a going-over. Warburton agreed, but he never produced the internist.

"The ulcer was in a spot that didn't show on the average X-ray. Finally, the patient hit the hard road. He came within an ace of cashing in his chips. He had strength enough and sense enough to get a new doctor. This new guy wasn't a psychiatrist. He could understand and diagnose. He called in a surgeon. By that time, the patient was allowed just about twelve hours more to live. They finally operated, found the ulcer, proved that the man's excessive nervousness and so-called 'agitation' was the legitimate result of agonizing pain. He was no more psychotic than I am. He is perfectly well today, but he wouldn't be if Thadeus Warburton had remained in charge.

"All right, so you're not interested in this other guy. That's reasonable. What I want you to understand is that Warburton not only can be wrong—but he is usually wrong. From what I hear, his main therapeutic weapon is fear. He scares his patients, he scares their families. In this case, he hasn't frightened your father, but he *has* worked on you. He's got you fighting a fog, trying to punch holes in something that has no substance and no reason. You've got to snap out of it, sweetheart."

She said she appreciated my effort to help. She admitted that the doc had her traveling in circles with his incessant double-talk, but she said she couldn't ignore his conclusions. She had reason to believe Warburton was right. Just today . . . well, that was why she had been calling me. I was the one person who would understand.

That was how I wanted it to be. The fine, stalwart male protecting his ladylove from danger. The only trouble was that I didn't know what the danger was, where it would strike, or

what to do about it if it did. I promised I would stick around from that moment until. She started to cry: not convulsively, but quietly and terribly. I wished I could have had my way with that quack psychiatrist for just about five minutes. I'd like to present him with a red-hot poker and help him shove it.

"But Danny," she protested. "He's right."

"About your father?"

"Yes."

"Because he said so?"

"No. That's the terrible thing. Because Dad himself said so."

That, I didn't grab. Eventually she explained that her father had telephoned her three times that day. He had talked erratically. He had threatened her. He had said that within the next twenty-four hours there would be a showdown between them. No, he didn't use the word "showdown," but that was what he meant. She didn't remember the exact words.

"Over the telephone?" I asked, trying hard to make like a cop again. "Are you sure it was your dad?"

"I'm certain. Of course, he didn't admit it, and he was trying to disguise his voice . . . but I know it was him."

I said that it didn't make sense. The old man could have walked right in on her: he wouldn't have had to go through all that cloak-and-dagger stuff of telephoning threats in a disguised voice. She said desperately that it was *somebody*, and she was terrified.

She again made me promise to stick close. If her father showed, she wasn't to be left alone with him. She said, "Something is going to happen, Danny: something awful. I know it."

In another ten minutes she'd have had me cutting out paper dolls. My common sense told me that there was something wrong in her figuring. Maybe it hadn't been Mr. Barton who had threatened her. I thought of Alan Rogers, Jim Fletcher, Tug Livingston, and even of Lew Henderson. It narrowed down to being a man—that's all I could be sure of. The father idea was too preposterous.

She invited me to dine with her in the hotel dining room. She said that when we had finished eating, she'd like to return to her cottage alone. I could follow. We wouldn't turn on any

lights. The grounds were illuminated : we could watch through her windows.

"Watch for what?" I inquired.

"For Dad. If he shows up . . . and if he acts peculiarly . . . well, at least I'll have you with me."

So we ate dinner. My worry about Sandra didn't affect my appetite, but she merely nibbled at her food. I made a half-hearted stab at paying the check, but she grabbed and signed it. Then she went to her cottage, and suggested that I follow unobtrusively after about ten minutes.

I smoked a cigarette and did some heavy thinking. Everything looked normal around the joint: young people, old people, queer people, kepties, and a fair sprinkling of picture and television talent. At one time or another I saw every man who was down on my mental list as a suspect. Every man but one.

I didn't see Ellis Barton.

29

I EASED MYSELF INTO Sandra's darkened cottage. I heard her whisper, "Darling! Thank God you're here!" Her arms were around my neck and she held me in a most gratifying manner. I did my best to quiet her jumpy nerves and asked whether she had seen her father. She said No, she hadn't, but she was sure he'd show. She had it bad. I suppose our friend Dr. Warburton would have called it a fixation or something like that.

As soon as my eyes got accustomed to the gloom, I searched the cottage. Just in case. If the old man happened to be off his rocker, if he had planned drastic action, he could easily have hidden himself inside the place while we were dining.

I didn't find him or anyone else. In the few seconds alone in the kitchenette I gave my gun a quick going over. I felt like a dope, but it seemed the thing to do. Then I rejoined Sandra in the sitting room.

I had locked the back door! The sitting room had three exposures. From its windows we could watch the main drive-

way, the approach to the front of the main hotel building, and Margaret Graham's cottage. Margaret's place was dark, too.

I established contact with Sandra, but such passes as I made were tentative. This wasn't the time for love-making. What this gal needed was reassurance.

I kept up an almost continuous chatter in the effort to quiet her nerves. I didn't seem to get anywhere. We sat together in the dark like two kids trying to frighten themselves by playing ghost. Various characters who interested me walked within eye-shot, but none of them interested Sandra. Her fear was concentrated. It was fear of her father, not of anyone else. The fact that Ellis Barton didn't seem to be anywhere around seemed to enhance her nervousness.

I figured she had the whole thing pegged wrong. The old man was probably enjoying a movie somewhere, not knowing that Sandra had built him up as a threat to her. I tried telling her that this fear of her father was absurd and without basis, but all I got was, "You'll see, Danny . . . you'll see."

Only one thing was happening in that cottage. Tension was mounting. It was getting so thick you could cut it with a knife. Many times previously I had applauded Sandra for her restraint and courage, for the way she kept herself under control. Now, things were different. I said, "You know, sweetheart—we're probably building up to an awful letdown." She didn't even hear me—or, if she did, she gave no sign.

All right, so I was nervous, too. It was an odd sort of a stake-out. I'd been on dozens of routine watches: sometimes waiting for desperate criminals to show. But under such circumstances you aren't scared because you know what you're looking for. Here, I knew nothing except that Sandra was frightened. Her fright could have a sound basis, or it could be imaginary. We even smoked stealthily. I would slip into the coat closet, close the door, light two cigarettes, come back into the sitting room with the glow of the cigarettes concealed, pass one carefully to Sandra, and we'd both smoke that way, so that not even the faint hint of occupancy would show from outside.

Being alone with Sandra, I expected time to rush by, but it didn't. The luminous dial of my wrist watch showed eleven,

eleven-fifteen, eleven-thirty. It crawled toward midnight. There was less activity on the hotel grounds. The moon was bright. We could see the lush, semi-tropical vegetation for which the Miramonte was famous. We were assailed by the vivid fragrance of magnolias and gardenias. The odor was too strong, too . . . well, too morbid.

Suddenly I felt Sandra's body stiffen. She didn't pull away. She seemed not to know I was there. But I could tell she had seen something. Her voice, coming in a whisper through the few inches of darkness separating us, was freighted with terror.

She said, "There he is!"

The silhouette of her arm showed against the frame of the window. I looked but saw nothing, so I said, "Steady, sweetheart." Then I asked, "Who?"

"Dad."

"Where?"

"I just saw him walk behind that tall hedge near the tennis courts."

I held her closer. I told her I hadn't seen her father. I suggested that her imagination had run away with her. She said fiercely, "I tell you, I saw him. . . ."

Then I saw him, too. He reappeared near the tennis courts, which were now dark. He stood there in apparent uncertainty, looking this way and that . . . and then straight at his daughter's cottage. A new, fresh fear grabbed me: not fear of myself, but fear for Sandra. This didn't look good.

Why had Ellis Barton showed at the Miramonte at this hour? Why was he surveying the grounds he knew so well?

Ellis Barton walked perhaps twenty yards toward the main building. Then he stopped and turned again toward Sandra's cottage. He moved to the corner of the hotel, from which point he could command a view of the parking lot. No one was with him. Sandra was clutching my arm with astonishing strength.

She said, "I knew it, Danny. . . . I knew it. . . ."

"Hold it!" My voice was steady. Whatever might be in the cards was right here.

Sandra said, "Don't let him come here, Danny. Please . . ."

I said, "He doesn't look dangerous."

"He is, though. He's not normal, Danny. I don't know what's going on in his mind. Those threats I got over the telephone. His waiting until this hour to show up . . . Follow him, Danny: please."

I asked why. I said we could stay right where we were and that I could grab him if he tried to enter. "That wouldn't be enough," Sandra said. "You should follow him. He doesn't know you're here or that you suspect anything. If he actually tried to get in here, you could stop him."

"On what excuse?"

"Invent an excuse, Danny. But take his gun away from him."

I argued that he probably didn't have a gun, but by this time I was having difficulty convincing myself.

I finally agreed to do what Sandra suggested. I'd tail Mr. Barton, keeping out of his sight, but watching every move. If he started to do anything out of line, I could grab him. If he had a gun on him, that would be so much gravy. I knew he didn't have a permit to carry a gun, and so I could use that as an excuse to hold him.

I asked Sandra whether she was afraid of being left alone in the cottage. She said No, she wasn't . . . as long as she knew I was sticking with her father. I walked out of the back door. I was as jumpy as a cat.

Ellis Barton was standing in the same spot. So far so good. I kept in the shadows and moved in his direction, keeping behind the hedge. Obviously, he hadn't seen me. That was how I wanted it.

He took three steps toward Sandra's cottage. I got ready to make my presence known. But he stopped. Again he seemed uncertain. Then he turned and walked toward the main building. I followed.

He entered the lobby. I took up my post where I could watch him without danger of detection. He looked around, then walked into the bar. I approached the front door, wondering what I would do if he decided to leave the bar through the service entrance. In that case, I figured, I'd better make tracks back to Sandra's cottage.

But he didn't do anything like that. From where I stood, I

could see a portion of the bar. Ellis Barton was looking over the guests. The bartender spoke to him, probably asking whether he wanted something. Whatever it was the bartender said, Barton shook his head No. Then he returned to the lobby and I faded back into the shadows.

After several minutes of obvious uncertainty, Barton left the lobby and started toward the parking area. That was in the opposite direction from Sandra's cottage. He turned into the lot, and I followed, concealing myself behind the second row of parked cars.

Sandra wouldn't be able to see either of us now. I hoped she had seen me pick up her father's trail; I hoped she would know that I'd stick close to the old man.

Barton was looking at the cars. He spotted Sandra's Cadillac. He looked inside. It was a convertible and the top was up, but it wasn't locked. After a few minutes, Ellis Barton closed the door. But he still didn't leave.

I wasn't scared. Not now, I wasn't. This was the sort of job for which I had been trained. This was something definite and tangible. I didn't know what—if anything—was cooking, but I sure as hell knew that if it boiled over, I'd be there.

Barton moved away: not toward his daughter's cottage, but away from it. He seemed to be interested in the other parked cars. He didn't look into any of them, but he gave the impression of checking to see whose cars were there and whose were out. By any standards, his actions were suspicious.

The cars in the lot afforded excellent cover for me. I was able to get close to him and still not risk being observed. He stood for a long minute staring down the driveway. I got the hunch that this would be a good time to make my presence known: to find out, in any event, whether he was packing a gun.

Silence had settled over the sprawling hotel grounds: a deep, tangible, almost frightening silence.

Then suddenly that silence was shattered by the bark of a gun. Silence again.

And then—high and hysterical—the sound of a woman's scream.

I recognized Sandra's voice.

30

THE PARKING LOT WAS APPROXIMATELY two hundred yards from Sandra's cottage. I took off like a big-tailed bird and made it in less than nothing flat.

Lights were flashing on behind the windows of the hotel and cottages, excited people materialized from nowhere and converged on Cottage 17.

Sandra's cottage was still shrouded in darkness. I opened the unlocked front door and snapped on the light switch. For a few seconds the light blinded me, and then I saw something. I saw much too much.

Sandra was standing in the middle of the room. Her left hand was pressed against her throat. The right hand hung at her side. In her hand was a heavy revolver. The odor of cordite was sharp.

She was staring down at the body of a man who lay about eight feet in front of her.

It was Wayne Medwick, and he was dead as a mackerel.

I saw someone in a bellhop's uniform and yelled for him to call the police and the ambulance. I dropped to my knees alongside Medwick and made a swift inspection. There was a hole in the coat of his conventional business suit, another hole in the white shirt. There wasn't much blood. There wasn't any pulse, either.

Guests and employees were crowding through the front door. I ordered them to stay outside. They all obeyed except one person: Ellis Barton.

Mr. Barton elbowed his way through the throng and went straight to his daughter. He put his arms about her and she started sobbing. She said, over and over again, "Dad! Oh, Dad!" as though by repetition she could find reassurance. The gun dropped from her nerveless fingers and I let it stay where it was. I didn't want anybody to move that—or anything else.

I disentangled Ellis Barton and his daughter. The older man was trembling violently; maybe from an overplus of emotion; maybe because of his sprint from the parking lot to Sandra's cottage. I tried to keep my voice steady. I said, "Excuse me, Mr. Barton," and ran my hands over him. He didn't carry anything which might have been mistaken for a gun. He didn't raise any objection to what I was doing. He didn't seem to be functioning at all.

I heard the wail of an approaching siren, then another. They had thrown away the rule book and were coming fast. Two uniformed men in a patrol car got there first. I assigned one of them to keep the crowd outside. I turned Ellis Barton over to the other. I told him in as few words as possible that I wanted him to be courteous to Sandra's old man, but I didn't want Barton talking to anybody until I had had a chance at him.

A second car appeared. It contained Lieutenant Bert Lane of West Los Angeles Division and a detective named Mason. I sure was glad to see Lane. It looked like old times: post-midnight, the Miramonte, a dead man. I asked him to get in touch with Marty Walsh and tell him to burn his tail getting out here. I asked him to notify the coroner and the crime lab. Then I suggested that he take charge of Ellis Barton until Marty Walsh showed.

That left me with Sandra. She looked like hell. I took her arm and got her seated on the couch. I sat alongside. I held her hand, trying to steady her. The hand was cold as ice.

Under circumstances less tense, I might have been amused. I was trying to calm her down when I needed steadying almost as much as she did. The halt leading the blind. But at least I had to make a noise like a detective. I couldn't afford to let anyone—especially myself—know how bewildered I was.

I pulled up a chair and moved Sandra into it. That way she wouldn't have to look at Wayne Medwick. I sat on the couch facing her. I said, "Try to keep yourself under control, sweetheart. Try your damndest."

She nodded.

I said, "You shot him?"

Again she nodded.

"Why?"

"I was sitting here alone. I was terribly nervous. I had seen you following Dad' into the parking lot. The door opened. A man came in. He looked as big as a mountain."

"Did you think it was your father?"

"I knew it wasn't Dad."

"Did you recognize Medwick?"

"Oh, God! No!"

"What happened then?"

"He said, 'I warned you a dozen times. You wouldn't listen. Now you're going to get the same thing I gave your brother.'"

"Yes . . . ?" I wasn't pressing her. I wanted to get it straight. And the quieter she was, the better chance I'd have.

"I recognized Mr. Medwick. I remembered the telephone girl had identified his voice as the one that had been threatening me. My instant reaction was one of gratitude that it wasn't Dad. And then . . . then . . ."

"Take your time, darling."

"I can't describe my fear. I knew that something awful was about to happen. Medwick's words began to assume meaning. He said I was going to get the same thing he gave my brother. I backed away from him. He started to follow me across the room. Slowly. As though he had all the time in the world. I remembered the gun. It was in the drawer of that little table. I knew it was loaded. I pointed it at him. He took a few more steps toward me. I shot him."

"Did he say anything else?"

"I don't remember."

"You say the gun was in the table drawer. You mean *that* gun?" I pointed toward the weapon that had dropped to the floor, the gun she had been holding.

She said Yes, that was the gun. I took a second look at it. It was a beautiful new shiny Smith & Wesson .38-caliber Combat Masterpiece. I said, "Where did you get it?"

"I bought it. From a gun shop in Westwood."

"When?"

"Two or three days ago."

"Why?"

"For you," she said. "I wanted to give you a present. Didn't you tell me you wanted one like that?"

I recalled our conversation about guns. I said, "Why didn't you give it to me before?"

"I wanted to wait until the time seemed right. I thought it would be fun surprising you with it. I had forgotten it tonight until Mr. Medwick came in. It was only after I got terrified that I remembered."

I said, "You just walked into a shop and bought the gun?"

"No. I thought I could, but it didn't work that way. The dealer showed me the gun. I paid him for it, and he gave me a receipt. He sent me to the detective bureau at the West Los Angeles station. He told me not to go until the next day because at least twenty-four hours had to elapse before he could give me the gun.

"I went to the detective bureau. I saw a couple of the officers. They said the dealer had telephoned about me. They asked me why I wanted the gun. I told them that it was a present for you. They all seemed to know you. They promised not to tell you. I explained that it was to be a surprise."

She stopped talking for a moment, as though to get a fresh grip on herself. "Two other detectives walked in about that time. They were introduced to me, but I don't remember their names. They asked me how I knew that every detective in Los Angeles wanted a Combat Masterpiece. I said you had told me—that I didn't know anything about guns myself. They were all smiling and kidding about how they wished they knew someone who would give them guns like that.

"They wrote out a card for me to take back to the dealer, a sort of release for the gun. They said it would be in my name and that when I gave it to you, the transfer would have to be recorded. I said I'd leave all that to you. It sounds rather grim, Danny, but it wasn't. They were nice—all of them. They joked about us being friends and said that Lieutenant Lane had mentioned me. I asked whether he was in, and they said he didn't come on until four in the afternoon.

"That's all there is to it, Danny. I took the release back to the shop in Westwood, the dealer had cleaned the gun for me—it

had been all covered with some kind of goo which looked horrible—though he said all new guns came that way. I bought a box of shells. He showed me how to load it, and warned me that I was to take it straight home . . . that owning the gun didn't give me the right to carry it."

"Had you told the dealer why you wanted the gun?"

"Oh, yes. When I first went to him. I wasn't sure whether I had remembered the name correctly. I described what you had told me and he said I had it right . . . that all the detectives he knew were queer for Combat Masterpieces." She leaned back in her chair and pressed her hands against her forehead.

She was making a valiant effort not to go to pieces. She didn't indulge in the customary histrionics. She didn't say, "I didn't mean to kill him," or any of the other silly things you hear in such situations. All she could recall was that she was frightened, alone, and helpless. She remembered the gun she had bought for me. She knew I was out of reach . . . tailing her father. She did the natural, instinctive thing: she protected herself.

I heard another car park outside the cottage. Marty Walsh barged through the door. I was never so glad to see a man in my life. This deal was for him, not me. I was too close to it, too involved, too sorry for Sandra.

Marty was his usual competent, assured, breezy self. He motioned me over to him. I left Sandra in her chair. Marty said, "Ain't this where we came in, Danny?"

I said it looked that way. He wanted to know how in hell Wayne Medwick happened to be the victim. As briefly as possible, I gave him a rundown. He looked at Medwick, at the gun, at Sandra, and at me. He said, "It figures."

I suggested that he take charge of Sandra. I urged him to be gentle. He grinned and said, "I know how you feel about her, kid. There's nothing to worry about. But hell! I got to find out exactly where Wayne Medwick fits in and why he was planning to kill your girl. Meanwhile"—he gave me a shove—"suppose you talk to Ellis Barton. You're the one who should know that setup. Jeez! you're practically a member of the family!"

31

I FOUND ELLIS BARTON SITTING IN the kitchen with Lieutenant Bert Lane. Bert had been working on the old man so that Barton seemed to be under control. He looked up at me and said, "Why did it happen, Danny? What was Medwick doing in Sandra's house?"

I said I didn't know—that none of us knew anything. I asked how he was feeling and he said he felt terrible. He said that his nerves had gone haywire ever since the night of his son's death.

I said, "Have you been at the hotel all evening, Mr. Barton?"

That was a come-on, but he didn't recognize it as such. He said, "No. I got here about an hour ago."

"Any particular reason?"

He said simply, "I was lonely. I thought I'd chat with Sandra. But her cottage was dark. I looked around for her . . . in the lobby, the bar, the cocktail lounge, the grounds. I went into the parking lot to see whether her car was there. It was. Then I looked for the cars of other friends of hers—folks who stay here at the Miramonte—thinking she might have gone out with one of them. People like Miss Graham, Mrs. Clark . . . you know, her friends. The cars I recognized all seemed to be in the parking lot or in front of the various cottages. I decided Sandra might have gone to bed. I intended to telephone her from the lobby. . . ."

"Telephone your own daughter instead of just dropping in?"

"Yes." He gave me a straight but embarrassed look. "I thought you might be there."

That came as something of a shock. I'm not a moralist, but I'm not an immoralist, either. For a father to know the score on his daughter's love life was one thing: to trot it out into the open was something else again. I felt myself blushing—and on the defensive. I said, "I have asked Sandra to marry me."

"She told me."

"Were you opposed to the match?"

"No. Why should I be?"

"Well . . . she's loaded, and all I have is the salary of a police sergeant and a pension after I've got my time in. You might have thought she would be throwing herself away."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't have thought anything like that, Danny. And she told me that *you* were the one who said you didn't think marriage with her would work."

Bert Lane said, with forced lightness, "This lad ain't quite right in the head, Mr. Barton. Now, if I'd ever gotten a break like that—"

"You'd react the same way I did, Bert." I turned my attention back to Ellis Barton. "Did you telephone your daughter any time today?"

"Yes. Once. The operator told me she thought Sandra was eating dinner with you, and offered to have her paged. I told her never mind."

That fitted, but it wasn't complete. I said, "Did you telephone her earlier in the day: at any time for anything?"

"No."

"Did you know about the gun she had in her cottage?"

"Yes . . . and no. What I mean is: she said something about buying a present for you—a certain sort of gun. I didn't know she had already done so."

Lane barged in. "Mr. Barton," he said, "how well did you know Wayne Medwick?"

"Not at all. I had met him, of course."

"Did you know that your daughter recently received threats over the telephone?"

He looked genuinely surprised. He said he hadn't known anything about that. It seemed reasonable enough. None of us had been considering Wayne Medwick. It was still difficult to figure him in.

Barton asked me what would be done about Sandra. I said she'd be subjected to routine questioning, but there was nothing to worry about. I asked him then whether, in walking around the grounds, he had seen Margaret Graham or either of her boy friends—Alan Rogers or Jim Fletcher. He said No. I asked him

whether he had observed Lew Henderson, the bell captain; or Tug Livingston or Mrs. Valerie Clark or 'Bunny Gilson. He said he didn't believe so.

And that was that. We were still walking in circles.

I left Barton with Lieutenant Lane. On my way over to the main building I tried to think. Not that thinking had done me any good so far, but it was the thing to do.

I found myself believing Ellis Barton's statement about not having telephoned Sandra except that one time during her dinner hour. I could readily understand that she had gotten the preconception about her father and had allowed it to grow. It was easy to understand that when someone had showed in her cottage and started threatening her, she would have hit the emotional skids.

But why Medwick? Where did he fit? I tried to forget that I was in love with Sandra Barton: I tried thinking of her coldly, professionally. Certain facts stood out: incontrovertible facts. I mentally listed them.

First, Wayne Medwick had visited Sandra's cottage. His dead body was proof of that.

Second, Medwick had seemed cooperative the night Clive Barton had been killed. By appearing to help us, he had only added to our confusion. If he had killed Clive, he couldn't have cooked up a smarter approach. By telling us about the two men—in addition to Clive—who had entered Margaret Graham's cottage the night of young Barton's death, he had planted the belief that it must be two *other* men; that one of them would not have been himself.

Third, Medwick was friendly with Margaret Graham, and the cool, poised Miss Graham wasn't too far from the middle of this bewildering mess.

Fourth, Medwick had been associated back East with a man named Harvey M. Walton. Mr. Walton had become deceased violently and mysteriously.

Fifth, there had been some association in New York between Harvey Walton and Clive Barton. Walton had been mentioned in connection with big-time narcotics; Tug Livingston had a record featuring a narcotics rap; Lance Holloway—now dead—

had known something of importance connected with the unset gems Sandra had found inside her door one night long, long ago.

Sixth, Margaret Graham had taken care of those jewels until the night of Clive's death in her cottage.

Seventh, Margaret had been friendly with Wayne Medwick.

Eighth, her story of Clive's death hadn't tallied with what the police had found. She could have been lying. If she were, then Wayne Medwick's story to us that night could have explained the discrepancies.

Ninth, Myrtle Zeigler, the telephone operator at the Miramonte, had insisted that the person who had threatened Sandra over the telephone sounded like Wayne Medwick. Wherever you looked, however you thought, you kept running into the estimable Mr. Medwick.

But why? Where did Medwick fit? What was his motive? I knew Marty Walsh was correlating the investigation into Medwick's past that had been under way for a long time. I knew that all the other special investigating groups in the department had been working along the same lines. I knew that the New York and New Jersey police and the FBI had been alerted. And now we could shake down Medwick's hotel room, go through his papers, trying to find the missing pieces.

I stood near a eucalyptus tree staring into the night. I wasn't aware of the lush vegetation of the elaborately tended gardens. Three murders had been committed here or hereabouts. I said to myself, "The joint is a god-damned slaughterhouse." I thought about the unknown Harvey M. Walton who had been murdered in New Jersey. I thought about Sandra and started worrying about her. The girl had been through too much, too fast. All I knew for certain was that I wished the case would be washed up and that I'd have sense enough to marry Sandra on her terms.

I stayed away from her cottage until the gruesome formalities had been completed: until the technical boys had finished their investigation, their picture taking, their measurements and diagramming; until the man from the coroner's office had done his stuff; until they had carted Mr. Medwick away ingloriously in the meat wagon.

I had a brief word with Marty Walsh. We compared notes. He said everything checked as far as Sandra's story was concerned. He said he was working on an idea about Wayne Medwick. He said he had talked to the Homicide skipper about this new development and that he—Captain Lowe—might be taking over the next day. I said that would be swell with me. I stated that I thought I had given a classic performance in the role of dumb cop, and Marty said that made two of us.

He told me that he had checked Gun Records by telephone and that everything Sandra had said about the purchase of the revolver was correct. He had talked to a couple of the dicks who had been on duty at West L.A. station when she had showed up for the release on the gun. He said, "The gun is a beauty, Danny. But what a hell of a way for it to begin its career!"

It was another of those nights. Long, tense, tedious, bewildering. Hard work, apparently pointless thinking, no convincing conclusions. Real true murder mysteries are often that way. You dig and dig and dig. Maybe you get somewhere: maybe you don't. But usually you have an idea—even if it turns out to be wrong. This time we didn't even have that comfort. Nothing made sense, nothing really fitted.

We drifted over to Cottage 16. Sandra and her father were there with Margaret Graham. Same old story in reverse. Alan Rogers had appeared in answer to a telephone call from Miss Graham. Valerie Clark had showed, and was offering to buy sandwiches and coffee and drinks for the crowd.

Sandra had accepted Margaret Graham's invitation to spend the night with her. I got Sandra alone long enough to ask her an important question. I asked whether she was now convinced that she had been wrong about her father, and she said ~~Yes~~. She blamed the psychiatrist for planting a preposterous idea that had grown into a certain and proven untruth. She said she wasn't worried any more—not about herself. She said she actually felt relieved, now that she knew her father wasn't involved.

But otherwise she was coming apart at the seams. I wished that we could be together, alone, for the balance of the night. She said she wished so, too.

It was four o'clock in the morning before we called it a

night. Captain Lowe had appeared and had done some questioning. He said he'd meet us at Homicide at two o'clock the next—or rather, that—afternoon. Marty and I went home.

I couldn't sleep. I telephoned Miss Graham's cottage. Margaret spoke in whispers. She said she had given Sandra two Seconals and that she was sleeping. I thanked her and said I thought I had a Seconal kicking around somewhere. I found it in my medicine cabinet and washed it down with water. It hit me hard in about twenty minutes.

But just before I kicked off into sleepyland, a fresh idea struck me.

Had I been smart to leave the girl I hoped to marry in the cottage with Margaret Graham?

I was still thinking about that when I passed out. The next thing I knew the alarm was sounding. The sun was shining. It was one o'clock in the afternoon.

32

I SHOWERED AND SHAVED WHILE THE COFFEE was percolating. I went downtown to Homicide and found that Marty and the Skipper had beaten me to it. They were going over a pile of reports from Los Angeles and all points east. I knew that something was in the wind. They said I'd find out soon enough what it was. The three of us piled into the captain's car and headed for the Miramonte. Two other Homicide dicks followed in a second car.

"Something?" I inquired.

The skipper said, "Maybe. Marty thinks he's got the answer."

I glanced at Lieutenant Walsh. He was doing some heavy thinking, nodding occasionally as he mentally catalogued point after point. I knew the signals. I didn't ask any more questions. Not just then I didn't.

Lieutenant Lane, Sergeant Gram, and two patrol-car officers from West L.A. were at Sandra's cottage when we got there.

They were busy rounding up people who might be interested. I could see that this had been prearranged.

Other hotel guests, employees, and visitors clung to the outskirts of the crowd, scenting a payoff. A uniformed patrolman named Hammersmith appeared with Bunny Gilson in tow. Bunny wore her customary lack of clothing and exhibited the customary curves. The Terry-cloth robe she wore over her scant bathing costume was unfastened and she was jabbering away with Officer Hammersmith. He looked flushed, embarrassed, happy, and hopeful. I could figure the trend of the one-way conversation. Hammersmith was young and good-looking. He glanced at me and shrugged as though to say, "What can I do, Danny? If she wants what she says she wants, she's gonna get it." I mentally wished him luck.

Tug Livingston was standing near the front door of Sandra's cottage. He had been scowling at the young police officer and Bunny Gilson. Then he saw me, and let me have a piece of his scowl. Tug was the sort of a guy who was permanently opposed to cops, no less now than on the night when he had hung a sneak punch on my jaw. I entertained a forlorn hope that he'd try the same stunt on young Hammersmith, who had been a Golden Gloves champ in his not-so-long-ago younger days.

As we entered the cottage Sandra appeared. She looked better than she had ten hours before, but still not her best. She asked whether she and I could have five minutes alone. I glanced at the skipper and he nodded. Sandra and I went into the bedroom and she closed the door. She came close to me but didn't touch me. She said, "I want to say something, Danny. Now. Before they begin."

I waited. Not patiently, because I couldn't ever be patient when I was that close to Sandra Barton. I had a vivid imagination and a keen memory. I was seeing something more than a lovely girl who had, in the immediate past, meant much to me and would, I hoped, mean even more in the future.

She said, "I've been thinking, Danny. We've both been foolish: we've been debating personal things that aren't important. I want you to know that as soon as this mess is cleared up, I want to marry you."

I grabbed her, but she didn't come any closer. I said, inanely, "You do?"

"Yes. What we've had has been beautiful, but it isn't enough. I don't care how poor you are or how much money I have. If you're willing to marry me, we'll live your way: on your salary, on my income, or we'll compromise. It doesn't matter to me any more. The only thing that matters is that we should be together—legally and for always."

I tried to say Yes, tried to make her understand how happy I was, tried to explain that my objections had been foolish. I felt like I was riding a cloud. I felt exultant and exalted. I felt like a young man very much in love. I resorted to my usual elephantine humor by saying that I'd be happy to make an honest woman of her. Then I wrapped her up and said, "You don't know how happy I am, darling."

I think we'd both have preferred to remain where we were until the end of time, but a sharp knock on the door brought us out of our clinch. Captain Lowe entered. He looked at us, grimed, and said, "So it's that way, is it?"

I said, Yes, it was. I said we were going to be married heap quick. I said I hoped he'd rearrange the vacation schedule so I wouldn't have to wait too long for a honeymoon. He told me not to worry about that. He made some remark about how lucky I was and he handed Sandra a line about acquiring a first-rate cop for a husband. Then he said, "Wipe off those radiant looks, you two. And you, Danny, try getting rid of the lipstick. On you it doesn't look good."

We followed the skipper into the sitting room. I was busting out all over with pride and happiness. Sandra looked proper and demure. Nobody paid any attention to us.

The stage was set, the cast all there. The skipper spoke his piece.

"This is important," he said. "I wanted all of you together. I could have invited you down to the City Hall, but it seemed simpler for us to come out here. I assure you, we're not trying to put on a show. We know a few things, but we're a long way from having all the answers. As we go along, some of you may provide those answers. This is not a trial; it's not an exhibition. Any one of you has the legal privilege of refusing to answer

questions. I'm requesting—not ordering—cooperation. Is that clear?"

Most of the heads nodded affirmatively. People started looking at each other oddly as though asking, "Are *you* involved? Do you think *I* am?"

Captain Lowe looked around the room. "Is Miss Myrtle Zeigler here?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir. . . ." Myrtle, looking frightened and subdued, raised her hand as a kid would do in school.

"You're the chief telephone operator on the afternoon shift, Miss Zeigler?"

"Yes, sir."

"With the consent of the detectives on duty, you listened in on calls to Miss Sandra Barton?"

"Yes, sir. But . . ."

"Don't try to apologize, Miss Zeigler. You've helped us a lot."

"Oh, thank you. . . ."

"You went on duty early yesterday?"

"Yes, sir."

"And stayed on beyond your regular time?"

She nodded.

"Did you listen in on certain calls to Miss Barton?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were they threatening in nature?"

"Most of them—yes, sir. Some were just casual. But there was one man who kept threatening her. He said something about there being a showdown within twenty-four hours. He said that now it was her turn."

"Anything more specific than that, Miss Zeigler?"

"Yes, indeed, sir. The last time he called he told Miss Barton that he would fix her the same way he had fixed her brother."

"You told Miss Barton about this?"

"Yes."

"Now, then, Miss Zeigler—and this is important: did you recognize the voice of the man who was doing the calling?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was it?"

"Mr. Wayne Medwick."

"Were you surprised?"

"No, sir. There had been lots of other calls to Miss Barton from the same man . . . I'd say for the last two weeks or so. He seemed to be trying to disguise his voice, but I always thought it was Mr. Medwick."

• "You had told that to the detectives working on the case?"
"Yes."

"And to Miss Barton?"

• "Yes. From the first I told her I thought it was Mr. Medwick, and she kept telling me I was wrong."

"Did she say who she thought it was?"

Myrtle hesitated. She looked beseechingly at Sandra and uncertainly at Captain Lowe. Sandra said, "Tell the officer, Myrtle. He knows, anyway."

Myrtle said, "Miss Barton told me she thought it was her father. She said he hadn't been acting normally since the night Mr. Clive Barton was killed. She said that some sort of a psychologist—something like that—had been observing him—"
"Him?"

"Mr. Ellis Barton. And this psychologist guy had said Mr. Barton wasn't quite right in the head or something. He told her—she said he told her—that Mr. Barton was dangerous."

The skipper thanked Myrtle. Then he smiled in an effort to make the spectators feel at ease. He suggested that those who wanted to should smoke. A few lighted cigarettes. It looked like a normal, average discussion group except for the fact that the room was loaded with cops.

Me, I was focusing on Tug Livingston. The man was poison-mean. He could spell trouble. I wondered whether the officers had thought to frisk him. If he decided to make a move, he'd do it fast.

Captain Lowe was speaking again. He said: "I won't take up much more of your time, folks. When I have finished I'll turn things over to Lieutenant Walsh, who has been actively in charge of the investigation. But before I do, I'd like you to understand something. We're dealing with murder. The chances are that most of you have a false idea of murder and the methods of detection used by the police. You see it on motion-

picture and television screens: everything wrapped up neatly and within a certain time limit. The detectives in those shows are supermen. They have the correct answer to every question. Well, I'll tell you right now that we haven't. I think we know some of the answers, but not all. What I mean is: if we have correctly pegged the guilty person, we will still need the help of many of you. It will still be necessary to fit the pieces together. We could be wrong. But I don't believe we are. We've assembled data from police departments throughout the country. Be patient. Try to help us." He turned to Lieutenant Walsh. He said, "Suppose you take over, Marty."

Walsh had been standing alongside the skipper. His expression was stern, his eyes cold. He spoke in a precise, clipped voice.

He said, "As Captain Lowe told you, there are a lot of angles we haven't pegged down definitely. We aren't trying to dramatize this, we aren't attempting to make a production of it. I shall have to follow the rules to a certain extent. You're all waiting for me to point out the guilty person. All right: I won't hold you in suspense.

"Ellis Barton," said Walsh coldly. "You are under arrest on the charge of murder."

33

ELLIS BARTON. That caught me with my pants down. The previous night I had been tailing old man Barton, expecting him to make a move against his daughter. If he had been the target of Sandra's lethal shot, I wouldn't have been surprised. But now . . . well, it came from outer space. I reckon there wasn't anybody in the room more amazed than I was.

I looked around at the spectators. They were an odd crew, a cross-section of swank Southern California hotel life. My attention was caught by Margaret Graham and Alan Rogers. They exchanged quick, startled glances.

Only Bunny Gilson was articulate. She grabbed the unresponsive hand of Tug Livingston and said, "That's real George." Be-bop talk, 1953 model. But it fitted Bunny. I suppose she was trying to say that she was relieved at having the finger put on anyone other than her provider. She was always in character, this Bunny. I recalled an appraisal Marty Walsh had made of her a few days previously. He said, "She knows which side her butt is breaded on."

Sandra sat motionless for a few seconds. Then she rose and crossed to her father. She took his hand and looked up at Marty Walsh. She said, "What is this, Lieutenant: a trick?"

"It's no trick," answered Marty. "Ellis Barton is our man."

Barton stared at his accuser. For the first time since I had met him, he looked his age. He was still ruggedly attractive, still self-possessed, but something had upset his mental applecart.

It was Jim Fletcher who suggested that, in view of what Marty had just said, the various killings couldn't have been the work of one man. "I don't mean the death of Wayne Medwick," he amended. "We know all about that. But Lance Holloway. And Ellis Barton's own son."

Marty said crisply, "I'll give you the setup as briefly as possible, folks. A lot of our information came from the East. Most of it, in fact. And I'll explain this: when we're sure of the identity of our criminal, it's usually simple to find proof. The first thing to explain to you is that Ellis Barton is not the amiable, conservative, affable retired businessman you thought he was.

"There's something behind all this that is bigger and more evil than murder. Narcotics. For a lot of our vital information we can thank the Narcotics Division of our own Department and the specialists in New York. They dug up the facts: we only assembled them."

Marty continued: "You'll have to readjust your thinking about Wayne Medwick. He's another man who wasn't what he appeared to be. We have proof that he was one of the brain guys behind a powerful narcotics importing ring. He never handled the stuff himself. He made the arrangements, designated the persons to whom it was to be entrusted, and merely collected his share of the profits. Before we finish investigating

Medwick, I'm sure we'll discover a lot of hidden cash or negotiable securities that were never reported on his income-tax returns."

I found myself nodding. I recalled an earlier statement about Medwick's income: that he scrupulously had reported annual gains of about \$40,000 on stock-market deals, but had never reported his losses. That hadn't made a hell of a lot of sense when I'd first heard it. Now, it fitted. It was a smart play to account for his affluence.

"What wasn't generally known—even among the higher-ups in the narcotics racket," Marty continued, "was that Wayne Medwick had a partner. That partner was named Harvey M. Walton. Walton was murdered in New Jersey more than six months ago. At the time he was killed, Ellis Barton was in New York. So was Barton's son, Clive.

"We have proof that Harvey Walton turned over a fortune in cash to someone he could trust—and by that, I mean someone over whom he had a hold. That person was Clive Barton. At the apartment hotel in New York where Walton lived, Clive was known as a masseur. He'd show up at certain times with a little black bag which was presumed to hold his massaging paraphernalia. Just a simple workingman, a kid. Harvey Walton had enough on Clive Barton to trust him with important dough.

"After Clive and his father moved to California, the younger man made frequent trips to New York. We figure that Walton was still turning over to him the money he didn't dare bank. We figure also that Ellis Barton suspected what was going on.

"Ellis Barton's figuring was simple. If Walton had turned over to Clive Barton for safekeeping all of his illicit profits, and if—obviously—there was no record of the amounts, the cash would become the property of Clive by the simple expedient of removing Walton from the scene. Not legally, of course, but actually.

"We are sure that Ellis Barton went East with his son, was present at the rendezvous spot in New Jersey where Walton turned his latest acquisition of cash over to Clive . . . and that the older Barton killed Walton. We don't figure Clive would

have planned or executed the deal that neatly—not that he was above it morally, but he simply didn't have the guts."

I edged across the room as unobtrusively as possible and ranged alongside Sandra. Her expression was a combination of horror and fright and disbelief. I whispered, "Steady, kid—steady."

She said softly, "I *can't* be true, Danny."

I said, "I'm afraid it is, darling. Marty doesn't shoot off his mouth just to hear himself talk."

Walsh's voice cut into our whispering. He said, "Ellis Barton's scheme was lovely. He made only two mistakes. The first was that he thought Harvey Walton was a lone operator. He didn't know that Wayne Medwick was Walton's partner. He didn't know that Walton had told Medwick the exact score."

"And Ellis Barton's second mistake was in his estimate of Clive Barton. He didn't know how weak and jittery Clive actually was. He realized eventually that Clive would have to be killed. That was the only way he could be trusted. Barton knew that Clive wasn't going to be at the party in the home of his daughter. He saw him go into Miss Graham's cottage. He followed Clive . . . and killed him with Miss Graham's gun."

The spectators had thought they were inured to shock, but this disclosure brought gasps of disbelief. A man allied with his own son in a criminal deal, and then killing that son to keep him quiet—that seemed to be reaching pretty far.

"Remember, folks, that Ellis Barton didn't know about Wayne Medwick. But Medwick knew all about Clive Barton. It was because of the Bartons that Medwick moved to California. He came to live at the Miramonte, where he could keep an eye on things.

"Medwick told us long ago that the night Clive Barton was killed he had seen two men entering Margaret Graham's cottage before the killing. One of those men was Clive, who was looking for some jewelry that had mysteriously appeared on the scene and had been left in Miss Graham's custody. Ellis Barton himself had told Clive where the jewels were; he planted the idea that it would be safe for Clive to steal them from Miss Graham's cottage while the party was going on.

"So Ellis Barton saw Clive entering that cottage. He followed. He killed Clive. And for a while he thought he'd have no further worry. It didn't take him long to discover that he was wrong.

"Some of you know that Miss Graham's story of finding Clive Barton's body didn't check with what the police found when they entered her cottage a half-hour later. Medwick subsequently told us that during that time he had seen a third man enter that cottage and leave it, carrying something. Even then we explored the possibility that that third man was Medwick himself. It was. He didn't want Ellis Barton suspected because he wanted the lion's share of the money that Clive had controlled and that Barton would now have. So Wayne Medwick moved the body and the gun; he disposed of the little rug on which Clive had died. He deliberately clouded Margaret Graham's story. He set her up as a patsy.

"In doing that, Medwick terrified Ellis Barton—which was precisely what he intended to do. Barton was guilty of two murders. But someone else was in on it. Someone had seen. Someone knew. That was what frightened Barton: that was what caused a condition of nervous agitation which justified calling in a psychiatrist.

"Through Miss Barton and Myrtle Zeigler, Barton learned of Lance Holloway's interest in the deal. Holloway's social and financial position indicated that he was the sort of young man who would play the angles. It is our belief that Ellis Barton thought that Lance Holloway was the person who had loused up the interior of Margaret Graham's cottage. If so, Lance was dangerous. He had to be disposed of. Ellis Barton learned—again through Myrtle Zeigler—that Holloway was going to meet Miss Graham in Royal Palm Canyon. He knew the place and the hour. He simply got there first. He killed Holloway and got away. Once again he thought he was safe. Once again he was wrong.

"He was badly frightened. He had now committed three murders. But he still wasn't free to enjoy the money Clive had been keeping for Harvey Walton. Now that you've heard the truth—"

Ellis Barton spoke. He said, "You're a fine narrator, Lieu-

tenant. Unfortunately, you're not a good detective. You've made a lot of accusations. You can't make any of them stand up in Court."

"I think we can, Mr. Barton. We've still got a lot of work to do, but this time we know where we're going. It won't be too difficult."

"You think you'll convince any jury that I would murder my own son?"

"I'm sure we can convict you of killing the man we knew as Clive Barton."

"What does that mean?"

"This," answered Marty. "You've been checked and double-checked, Mr. Barton. Ellis Barton is not your name. Your real name is Floyd Scott. You were married once a long time ago, and your wife died. In tracing that, the New York police discovered several important things. The most important was that you never had any children. The young man you murdered was not named Clive Barton. He was named Clive Mathews, and he was not your son."

34

IN A BRIEF, incredible moment Ellis Barton had ceased to be a bereaved father, almost demented by grief. He had been transformed into a murderer.

He denied the charge. But his denials rang falsely.

I regarded Marty Walsh and the skipper with admiration. They hadn't done all the investigating: the New York Police Department must have put in a lot of work on that . . . but Captain Lowe and Lieutenant Walsh had assembled and evaluated the evidence.

But something was wrong. Something was missing.

Of course, I understood a lot of things that I hadn't previously suspected. I understood the narcotics background, the juggling of Wayne Medwick's brokerage accounts so that his mode of living would check with his reported income. I understood that, since he had known all about Clive Barton's

employment as custodian of the murdered Harvey Walton's money, he would try to muscle in on it. I could see the sense—from Medwick's standpoint—of lousing up the scene of the original killing to divert suspicion from Ellis Barton.

More than anything else, I now understood Barton's fear. It had been fear of the unknown. He, too, had been playing detective, seeking to discover the identity of this unknown person who had interfered in a beautifully planned crime.

Marty was explaining that the case was all tied up, ready to be delivered to the district attorney's office. He was on the right track, he had enough proof to make the remaining task a mere routine police grind. It wasn't the neatly packaged deal that viewers of TV mystery shows had learned to expect, but then real-life murders seldom are.

I stood with my arm around Sandra's waist, admiring my superior officers and feeling sorry for the girl I loved. I don't think anybody noticed that I had my arm about her. At that moment, folks were not interested in a cop's romance. Their attention was focused on the man who had been known to all of us as Ellis Barton.

Sandra's right hand was pressed against her lips. She was fighting against a complete crack-up. I whispered, "Don't go to pieces, sweetheart. Please."

All about me there was a buzz of questions and answers. One of the cops had stationed himself alongside Ellis Barton, just in case. There was a hint of violence when Marty started hurling questions at Tug Livingston. Tug was his usual belligerent self, but he didn't sound off quite as loudly as he had done in the past.

I couldn't understand why I was restless, why I couldn't accept Marty's pronouncements as final. Something kept nagging at me.

I suppose that what was happening to me has occurred to any professional policeman. It's a combat between your instinct and your common sense. My intelligence told me that Marty and the skipper had said the last words; my instinct warned me not to accept their conclusions without reservation.

I saw Marty looking at me. He said, "What's the matter, Danny? Can't you buy it?"

I shook my head. "Some of it fits," I said. "But not all."

Marty reminded me that I had been closer to the case than anybody else. He asked what was bothering me, and I said I didn't know.

"Don't you agree," he asked, "that Ellis Barton is our man?"

"Yes. . . ." My answer didn't even convince me. I saw an expression of displeasure cross Marty's face. After all, he and Captain Lowe had done the job of fitting the pieces together; they had unearthed some startling information; they had offered the easy way out. And I was still bothered.

And then, suddenly, it hit me: little things that had seemed of no importance; circumstances that hadn't fitted into any other part of the picture, but which fitted now.

I heard a voice. It seemed to come from far away and to be freighted with unhappiness. It was my own voice.

I said, "Ellis Barton is probably guilty of everything you've accused him of, Marty. But you haven't carried it far enough."

Walsh and Lowe exchanged glances. Marty said, "If you've got a better idea, kid—suppose you let us have it."

In the few seconds since the idea had been born, doubt had become certainty. My arm tightened about Sandra's waist. I knew that everyone was watching me, everybody was listening.

"What have I missed?" asked Marty.

"Only one thing," I answered, still not recognizing my own voice. "You've missed the central figure in this series of murders."

"All right!" Marty's voice was edged with impatience. "Who is he?"

"The real murderer," I said miserably, "isn't a 'he.' It's a woman. Sandra Barton."

35

THERE WAS A BRIEF PERIOD OF SILENCE. Then a clatter of voices. Then, again, that awful silence.

My arm was still around Sandra's waist. I heard her shocked voice: "Have you gone crazy, too, Danny?"

The others didn't use those words: they didn't use any words. But their eyes told me what they were thinking. I caught a significant interchange of glances between the skipper and Marty Walsh. The latter spoke. His voice had lost its harshness. It was now infinitely gentle and charged with sympathy. He said, "You must be awful sure, Danny."

I told him I was sure. I said I supposed I had suspected it for some time, but had fought against the realization. I had subconsciously been trying to put out of my mind something I didn't want to believe.

I said, "I'm in love with Sandra. We were planning to be married. . . ."

It was a hell of a situation. You're in love with a gorgeous girl, you're standing in front of a lot of people, and you've got your arm about her. You can't help what she has done, or protect her against what the future holds in store. You know she means more to you than anything in the world . . . and they're asking you to explain how you know she is a murderess.

The tension was terrific, but the atmosphere now was sympathetic. They were sorry for me, sorry for Sandra. It had been hard enough for them to accept Ellis Barton as the arch-murderer: to regard Sandra in that light seemed to be an impossibility.

She hadn't moved away from me. Nor had I withdrawn my arm. I still had the primitive, masculine impulse to shield her even while I was accusing her of murder.

Marty said, "Would you rather talk somewhere else, Danny?" and I said this was as good a place as any. The skipper said, "Where did we miss out, Danny? What did we overlook?"

"Last night," I answered. "Wayne Medwick wasn't killed on the spur of the moment. His death was a carefully premeditated murder."

They waited patiently for me to go on. I said, "I should have known it sooner. Myrtle Zeigler always insisted that the threats Sandra received over the telephone came from Medwick. She told me; she told Sandra. . . ."

I found myself turning into a cop again. It was the toughest transformation I'd ever experienced. I forced myself to forget the misery that lay in store for both of us.

I said, "You bought that gun for me, Sandra—but you didn't give it to me. You're a generous, impulsive person. The natural thing for you to have done was to present me with the gun the very night you got it. You held back because you intended to use it first. You planned a killing right under my nose: a homicide which wouldn't look like a murder."

She shook her head ever so gently. She said, "No, Danny . . . no, darling."

"Clive wasn't Ellis Barton's son. You aren't his daughter, are you?"

She said, "I wasn't his daughter."

"And Clive wasn't your brother, was he?"

"No."

The picture was becoming more sharply focused. I said, with greater harshness than I intended, "He was your lover."

"Danny! You've no right—"

"I have every right. I'm in love with you. That's one reason I've been so blind. Brother! And we've been looking high and wide for the girl to whom he wrote the unmailed love letter we found in his apartment the night you killed him. Now we know. That letter was written to you, Sandra. Of course we'd never suspect." I spoke to Marty without looking at him. "You've got that letter in your files," I said. "Maybe you remember how it was worded. It was the letter of a discarded lover . . . of a man who actually had had an affair with the woman he was writing to."

Marty said, "I'll be god damned."

• "It all fits now," I continued miserably. "The letter does more than betray a sex affair. It indicates that Clive was under Sandra's thumb. She was the masterful one. She was calling the turns. And because he was a weakling, because he was in love with her, because he couldn't bear to see her with other men, he was dangerous." I was talking directly to Sandra again, my voice repressed and bitter. "You were keeping his money for him, weren't you, Sandra? You had it all. You might as well

tell the truth. We can dig it up now. It might take some time, but we can find it. You'll make it easier all around, if you give us the right answers. You've got that money, haven't you? You killed him, didn't you?"

Sandra did an unexpected thing. She put her arms about my neck. She kissed me with a strange admixture of passion and tenderness.

"I'll confess two things, Danny," she said in a voice that was not steady. "I confess that I killed Clive. I also confess that I love you. Are you satisfied?"

36

I WAS TWO MEN. As a cop, I was satisfied. As a person, I was wallowing in the nethermost depths of misery.

The room was jammed with people, but as far as I was concerned there were only the two of us: Sandra and me. I couldn't cast off love as though it were a worn-out garment. I looked into her stricken eyes and saw the same beautiful, generous, responsive girl who had kept me dizzy from the hour of our first meeting. I could not convince myself that she was not in love with me. At first . . . well, maybe then she had been using me. But somewhere along the line things had changed. What might have been a coldly calculated move to protect herself had become something warm and lovely and rich with promise.

Your thought processes slide off on an unexpected tangent in unusual circumstances. I found myself remembering my nights with Sandra, nights when we'd been alone, with all the rest of the world shut out, nights during which we had lain in each other's arms, devastated by ecstasy, unutterably spent and contented by its aftermath. I recalled the firm, yielding warmth of her young breasts, the slim, seductive curve of hips and thighs, the lips which were alternately torrid and tender.

Yet, while I was remembering all this in maddening detail, I was holding her tight, firing cop questions, demanding that

she betray herself irrevocably. My bosses gave me free rein. I could feel their sympathy reaching out to me, I knew they'd spare me if they could. But they had no alternative.

I said, "Those unset jewels you found inside the door of your cottage a week or so before Clive was killed—those were actually yours, weren't they, Sandra?"

"Yes."

"You took them out of their settings, printed the crude note on the paper in which they were wrapped, and put them there yourself to create the impression that an outside criminal element was involved. Right?"

"Yes, Danny," she said.

"You knew that nobody would claim them, and even if someone had—their claim couldn't have been substantiated. You knew that, didn't you?"

"I knew that—yes."

"And that, eventually, the law would have returned the jewels to you?"

"I believed so. But the jewels themselves were unimportant."

"You deliberately planted the idea that Clive might have stolen them to explain turning them over to Margaret Graham. Isn't that so? You were withholding Clive's money from him—forcing him to beg you for every penny. You told him where the gems were hidden. You suggested, didn't you—perhaps without actually saying so—that he'd have a perfect chance to grab them while Miss Graham was at the party in your house?"

She was making a gallant effort to keep from going to pieces. She said, "I've confessed, Danny. Must we go into all the details?"

The answer to that was Yes. Confessions can be repudiated. When you've got a criminal in the mood to talk, you have to keep hammering. Later they can testify that they were under duress or mental strain: maybe that they didn't know—or mean—what they were saying. But if it's truth they're telling, it remains truth, and substantiation of the truth is never too difficult.

"Clive trusted you, didn't he? He wanted to marry you?"

"Yes."

"The three of you—your supposed father, your supposed brother, and you—connived in the murder of Harvey M. Walton in New Jersey?"

"No," she answered. "Clive was not in on that. We knew that he was receiving huge sums of cash from Walton: we knew that the money came from dope traffic. Walton had a strong hold over Clive. I never knew precisely what it was, but I knew that my brother was weak . . . that he'd never step out of line." (It was odd how we both kept referring to her criminal companions as her father and her brother. That was the way I had always identified them: that was the way she had schooled herself to think of them.) "Clive fell in love with me. He told me everything. I told my father—the man who posed as my father. We believed that Harvey Walton was a one-man show . . . that if he were dead, there would be no one left who knew about the money.

"We moved to California and set up our new relationship. I kept Clive as far away from me as possible. It was essential that everyone we met should regard him as my brother."

"Who actually killed Harvey Walton?"

"I did. Clive made frequent plane trips East. We knew when and where he would meet Walton. My father and I went East—that time—on another plane. When Clive met Walton near Red Bank, New Jersey, we were there. I killed Walton. Clive was stunned. He almost cracked up completely. I talked him into turning the money over to me. Here in California, Dad shared an apartment with him because we knew that his nerves were shattered. We were afraid of him."

"You knew nothing about Wayne Medwick's association with Walton?"

"Nothing. We thought that with Walton out of the way, the money would be clear. That was why I got so terrified when Clive's body was moved after his death. I knew then that someone else was in on it, someone was watching. We didn't know who."

"What made you suspect Lance Holloway?"

"Because I'm certain Lance recognized the jewels in that package I planted inside my door. Holloway had been trained

by his uncle, who was a respectable and successful gem importer. He could recognize stones outside their settings. He had seen me wearing most of them. I was positive that what he wanted to tell Margaret Graham was that there was something queer going on and that he knew I was in the middle of it. He might even have suspected that I had arranged for Clive to burglarize Margaret's cottage, to make his death look like the shooting of an intruder."

) "And after you killed Holloway . . . ?"

"I thought that would be the end of my problems. But, Danny—those things seem never to end. Within two days I was again getting threatening telephone calls. The voice, as always, was disguised. Clive was gone. Lance Holloway was gone. I briefly suspected Tug Livingston. . . ."

"How did you know it wasn't?"

"I couldn't be certain. But it wasn't in character. He'd either have kept out of it altogether, or he'd have made a direct approach to me."

"So then . . . ?"

"Someone, Danny—either you or Lieutenant Walsh—mentioned that Walton had been associated with Wayne Medwick. Myrtle Zeigler had always insisted that she thought the calls came from Medwick. Then a couple of times he telephoned me from pay stations. He merely gave me the number of the station he was at, told me to go outside the hotel and call him. He never admitted his identity . . . but I was convinced. In both those calls he told me what he knew. He made an appointment to come to my cottage last night. He demanded half the money."

I asked her where the money was. She gave me the name of the bank and the locations of the two branches where she had rented boxes under assumed names.

"So," I persisted, "that stuff about being afraid of your father was all a stall, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"You planned for me to be following your father so there wouldn't be any possible chance of my being underfoot when you killed Medwick."

She nodded.

"And you shot him with the gun you apparently had bought for me. You knew just when he'd be there. You arranged for your father to lead me into the parking lot so I wouldn't upset your plans."

She said "Yes," very, very faintly. I was feeling like hell. I was relieved that I had so nearly reached the end of my hateful job. I was grateful to Sandra for cooperating. That is, I was grateful to Sandra, the murderess. For what I had done to Sandra, the woman, I felt like a heel. I had recognized her defenselessness: I had deliberately taken advantage of it. I knew that not even the shrewdest lawyer could get her out of this one.

I felt no elation. Only pain. Instead of hate, I felt love. That, I couldn't help. It was a lousy situation. I had done what I was supposed to do—and I loathed myself for it. For the first time in my life, I hated being a policeman.

I could see the bleakness of her future even better than she could. At the moment she was unburdening herself, cleansing her mind of all the terrors that had beset it for so long. We knew that this could end only one way, and yet I sensed that our second personalities—the personalities that had loved each other—were avoiding the full implication of what lay in store for her.

Of course, the man we had known as Ellis Barton was in as deep as Sandra. But he didn't figure in my calculations.

I should have felt proud of myself. I didn't. I should have realized that I was no longer in love with Sandra. But I couldn't admit something that wasn't true. I loved her. For now. For always. I couldn't help that. I heard her say, "I'm so sorry for you, Danny. I wish I could have spared you this."

That was Sandra. The girl who had just confessed to murdering four men, who had planned those murders deliberately and astutely, who had campaigned to control a huge sum acquired through narcotics traffic, the filthiest thing in the criminal world . . . the girl who had told me all of this was still the girl I loved.

She said quietly, "You didn't know for sure until just a little while ago, did you, Danny?"

I said 'No, I hadn't. I said that there had been several things that hadn't made sense until Marty Walsh had outlined Ellis Barton's part in the deal.

Sandra said, "Where did I slip, Danny? How did you know it was I?"

I didn't want to talk any more. I was feeling more miserable by the minute. But she was insistent.

I caught Marty Walsh's eye. He said, "You've gone this far, kid. Maybe you'd better give us the rest of it."

37

"GIVE US THE REST OF IT." That's what Marty Walsh said. The skipper nodded at me. They were right, of course. From a police standpoint, this was the golden moment, when the suspect breaks and overflows with truth.

Yes, this was the time for me to talk, too. The idea was that if there were flaws in my reasoning, they would show up now and not later, at a trial, when every detail had been subject to study by a smart defense attorney. Sandra would check me if I had been wrong. That was the way she was feeling. Sure, the confession itself would be sufficient: the evidence we could pile up as the result of that confession would be more than enough. But this was the big chance to get everything in its proper place, each circumstance correctly evaluated.

"There were little things, Sandra: things that all of us saw. Like, for instance, the failure of either you or your father to administer Clive's estate.

"You claimed there was a shortage of glasses and china at your party. The party—that is, the eating and drinking parts—were almost ended then. Yet you made a great to-do about it, and encouraged Margaret Graham to go to her cottage. You had already been there and had killed Clive. You knew what Margaret would find—and you wanted her to find it. You wanted her in the spotlight, not yourself.

"The condition in which we found Miss Graham's cottage after Clive's body was discovered—that always seemed to worry you more than it should. If only Margaret Graham had been worried about that, it would have made sense. But why should it concern you? And it did, because you talked about it frequently.

"But the things that really told the story—the important things which finally proved to be that it had to be you—those were so tiny, so apparently inconsequential, that they didn't hit me until just now."

I paused. My thinking was not as clear as I would have liked, my words not as conclusive as I wanted them to be. My trouble was that I was too involved emotionally. Instead of standing in front of an altar with this lovely girl saying, "I do," I was in a roomful of strangers saying, "I sentence you to death."

From somewhere deep inside herself, Sandra produced a ghost of a smile. It wasn't mirthful. It was merely a brief relaxation of the lips, and it was supposed to encourage me. I would cheerfully have called it a day, but they were waiting for me to continue. I had no choice.

"The first of the two little things, Sandra, was . . ." My face flushed and I tried to get a fresh grip on myself. I said, somewhat harshly, "Spell the word 'believe.'"

She looked at me in astonishment. I repeated my order: "Spell the word 'believe.'"

She said, "*B-e-l-e-i-v-e*."

"That's wrong, Sandra. So terribly wrong. But it's consistent."

"I—I don't understand . . ."

"I didn't either, until my thinking began to clear up. You see, Sandra, I have seen three notes since the night I met you. The first of these was the letter that was wrapped around the jewelry you found inside your door. In that note the word 'believe' was misspelled just as you misspelled it a moment ago.

"Immediately after Clive's death, you had Miss Graham show us the jewelry and the note. You said you hadn't reported it to

the police because you were afraid that your supposed brother had originally stolen the gems. No other word in that note was misspelled, Sandra: not one.

"Some time later we found in Clive's apartment an unfinished love letter . . . a letter that we know now had been intended for you. He used the word 'believe' in that note. But he spelled it correctly.

"Still later, you wrote me a letter. Maybe I should have noticed it then, Sandra, but I didn't. It was a love letter and I was interested in the contents, not in the spelling. In that letter to me, Sandra, you used the same word, but you spelled it *b-e-l-e-i-v-e*. I don't know what a jury will think about that as evidence, but certainly it would be corroborative. To me, it proved something. It didn't mean merely that you—like so many other people—occasionally had trouble spelling simple words: it meant that you had misspelled that specific word. It told me that you had printed the note in which the jewels were wrapped . . . the one you wanted us to think Clive had written."

Sandra's eyes never wavered from mine. She said, "You're right, of course, Danny. And the other thing?"

"If I hadn't been completely stupid," I said sharply, "I'd have pegged the answer then. Because you practically told me the truth and I didn't see it."

"How, Danny?"

"There was one night we were together, Sandra—one special night. We were talking about Clive's death. You were worried about what had happened. You told me that you were sure Clive had entered Miss Graham's house to steal the jewelry you had left with her. You said you had told him where the jewels were hidden. And then you said, 'He had the key to the rosewood desk.'

"Sandra, you couldn't have known that he had the key to that desk unless you had told him where it was, and had known that the first thing he would have done on entering Miss Graham's cottage would be to get the key from the place where she kept it. No one except Lieutenant Walsh and I knew Clive had that key in his possession at the moment he was killed. Even Miss Graham didn't know it. She thought it was still in

the drawer of her dressing table. She started to get it for us and we told her that we had already found it. We didn't tell her then where or how we had found it. It didn't register with her, and so she wouldn't have passed the information along to you.

"And that's all, Sandra. That's how I knew."

She said, "I *had* told Clive where the key was, Danny. When I heard the first story—Margaret's version of finding him in front of the rosewood desk—I knew he wouldn't have been there if he hadn't first gotten the key from the dressing table. By that time I was so worried about other things . . . about the body having been moved . . ."

"Yes," I said. "You knew positively that Clive had been moved because he was at the rosewood desk when you shot him, wasn't he?"

"Yes," she said simply, "he was."

I turned away. I'd had just about all I could take. I didn't have a thought or an emotion left in me.

Sandra said in her low, husky voice, "You did what you had to do, Danny. I know what it means to me. I think I know what it means to you, too." She spoke to Marty Walsh. "I suppose you'll take me downtown now?"

He said, Yes, they would. She'd be booked on an official "suspicion of murder" charge. They wanted her to dictate and sign a confession. She agreed.

The air in the room was stifling. Sandra and I looked at each other. Once again we seemed to be alone.

She said, "Will you kiss me goodbye, Danny?"

I took her in my arms. I held her close for a long, long minute. I kissed her.

Then I stepped back. I was looking straight at her, but I didn't see her.

It's not possible to see when your eyes are filled with tears.

THE END

